TRAMPING TO LOURDES

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JOHN GIBBONS

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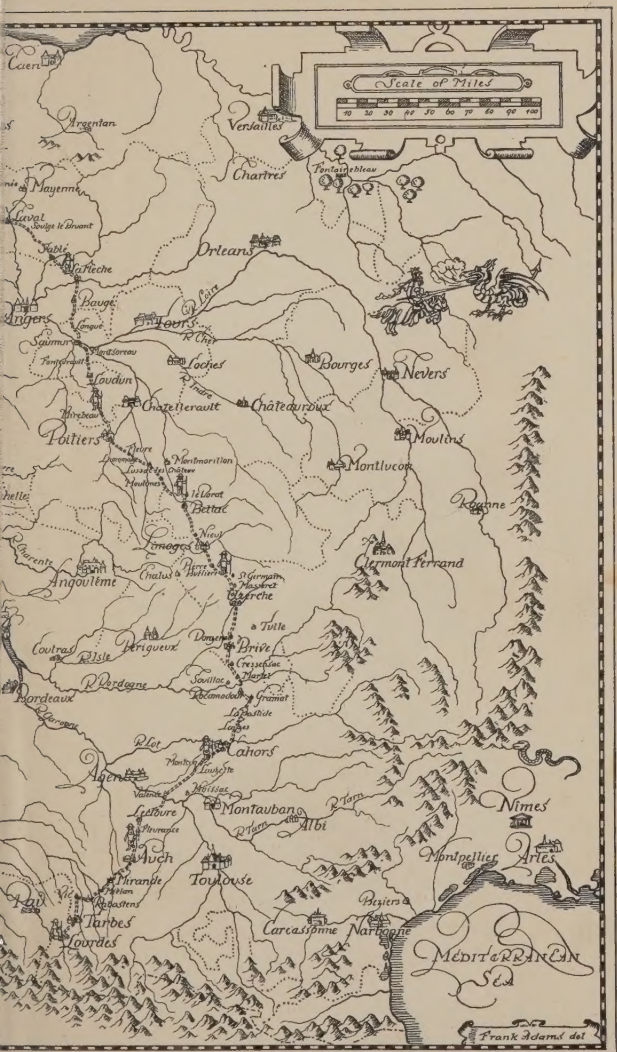
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TRAMPING TO LOURDES

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TRAMPING TO LOURDES

Being some account of the Adventures that befell John Gibbons, of Hornsey in Middlesex, in a Pilgrimage undertaken through Anjou and Auvergne, Quercy, Béarn, and Bigorre, with other Foreign Parts, in the 47th year of his Age, and in the Year of Grace 1928

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MAP

A MAP OF THE AUTHOR'S ROUTE TO LOURDES . . . . *Front Endpapers*

(From a drawing by Frank Adams)

Portions of this book have previously appeared in 'The Universe' *and in the* 'Wide World Magazine,' *of London, and in* 'America,' *of New York.*

TRAMPING TO LOURDES

I

HALF A DOZEN times in that long and sleepless night I must have wandered up to the deck above, and each time I had met the little parson. The first occasion stands out. Tormented beyond endurance by the monotonous beat of the engines directly underneath my make-shift bed on the floor of the second-class saloon, I had crept up the companion stairway to whatever world of adventure might lie above. The ship, controlled unseen from a higher deck forbidden to those who travel second, might have been steering her own course to an unknown destiny, so very silent it seemed. Aloft the breeze was tanging sharply on the ropes and wires. They sounded as the harp-strings of romance. I stood there solitary in a world newborn; and then, appearing from a corner, the parson spoke to me. That coast over there, clear-cut in the rising sun, was, he told me, Jersey. 'Guernsey,' I corrected him, for in travelling there is no need to admit that one is not well-travelled, and as he failed to argue the point it is possible that he may have been almost as ignorant as myself.

After this opening it was easy to be amiable. I had decided that much need as there might be for sleep in view of the to-morrow and the to-morrows

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after that, need for that night in face of the throbbing screw must be my master, and so with each successive impatience of mine we kept taking up our talk. He was going to Brittany. We sadly agreed that Brittany was becoming overcrowded. In particular we were embittered on the subject of 'tourists', and I remember my own emphatic views on the point. For myself, I told him, I was bound for Lourdes, and as I added casually that I was in point of fact walking there, I tried to throw into my voice a note of boredom proper to an English gentleman who even though of the second class might have spent a lifetime strolling across foreign parts; for we Britons, they say, scorn to wear our hearts upon our sleeves, and in all our adventures it may well be the same. Not for worlds could I have owned to him that here was any adventure at all. As well have told the man that I could speak no French, or have admitted that I had next to never been in France before.

It was probably some mere impulse of ordinary kindness that prompted him to propose himself my host at breakfast, when the hurly-burly of the landing was safely over. With his 'Brittany' and his English friends all safely mapped out only a few stations away, it could hardly have been that he too, faced by a new world that bustled past the café in an unknown tongue, felt faintly and yet delightfully frightened. But as we exchanged commonplaces about his London suburb, so very ordinary that it might have been my own, the map of France that I carried anxiously in my mind's eye, its twelve departments on the thousand-kilo route to Lourdes all neatly plotted out in blues and yellows, grew a trifle blurred because of the

flurry of the hurrying waiters. I had something of the feeling of the zero hour. When he had finished that egg, he would go ; and I should be left alone in an unknown France, with exactly enough money to last me at the rate of five shillings a day to Poitiers, something like two hundred miles away.

As I hurriedly tried to remember in which department the map had showed Poitiers, the egg came to its end. The whistle blown, as it were, I got to my feet with a jerk.

My host's last remark as he reached for his clerical hat made me conscious that I was standing on firm ground. The boat had been late into St. Malo, the formalities at the Customs had taken hours. He ventured courteously to hope that the delays might not have prevented the meditation at the cathedral with which I had doubtless planned to begin my pilgrimage. It was that which brought me up with a round turn. For while I might not know one St. Malo street from another, might not have the French words to order breakfast decently, most certainly did not have enough money to invite a guest, at least I knew precisely what I wanted from the cathedral. And no delay in the world was going to prevent my getting it. The polite mention of possible obstacles brought my purpose into clean perspective. The thing was as clear-cut as an army order, with not the tiniest loop-hole for doubt. As the parson left me I knew where I was.

My promise to my wife bound me to walk across France from Mont St. Michel to Lourdes, though I was free to accept any stray lift neither begged nor paid for. My bargain with the Catholic paper that was helping with my money was to call at

certain specified shrines along the road, and to say a specified prayer before each specified altar. That was all there was to it. The first one would not take three minutes. Not a word about meditations or any other subtleties. My duty to myself was to scramble through on thirty francs a day. I was all ready to begin. And as pilgrim I had never regarded myself. A proxy pilgrim I might be for my own wife, the poorest of substitutes for real devotion, but at least there was going to be no pretence about the matter. St. Malo Cathedral was a specified place within the meaning of the bargain. I was going there as soon as I might find it; I was going to do precisely what I had promised, and afterwards I proposed to myself a glass of beer. Only I did not know that my pronunciation was going to bring me a pinkish wine instead, the stuff that the French so ignorantly call *byrrh*.

Once away from the 'English Spoke Here' cafés and the parson's cab a mere speck on the long, dusty road to the station and his Brittany, I was fairly started. The obstacles, absurd as they were, began to get into action. At home, for instance, were I to ask for the *Daily Mail* and be given instead a box of matches I should think the man a fool. Here, when I remembered the word and demanded *Des allumettes* and was handed the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*, it was I who was the ass. Three separate times did I ask a policeman for *la Cathédrale* and three times did he fail to catch what I said. In the end, as I had to find the place somehow, I wrote it down for him. The trams were running on the wrong side, and one of them nearly ended my story. Some one shouted angrily at me, and from being a British

tourist in a mere holiday country I turned into a foreigner in France. But the process of adjustment, bewildering as it was, has its delights, and even a stray seat by the roadside, commonplace enough but of a pattern unknown at home, became an oriental throne. Everything indeed was ' different '.

By Dol an hour later the transformation was complete and I was now definitely in France. With the tourists in charabancs and their inspection of the cathedral I had nothing in common. They might have been an antiquarian society making an outing to Hornsey parish church. The cathedral was my business, and I had no interest in its history. Incidentally, as I just got in my three minutes before a sexton sort of person turned me out, I made my first business note, that French churches and cathedrals throw out between noon and perhaps three o'clock. The little *estaminets*, on the other hand, with their awnings drooping lazily over a sun-baked pavement, remained continuously open for any stray customer who chose to drowse away a noontide hour. After all, each country knows best its own weaknesses, and while there seems small risk of weekday overcrowding in an English provincial church, the vast coolness of Dol Cathedral was sheltering its little knots of scattered worshippers. They can indeed have been doing nothing else but worship, for there in the dead silence before the little lamp there was nothing else to do.

Are there many men of forty-six, one wonders, staid, slightly shabby, corpulent in their habit, and yet consumed with a vain desire to ride standing up on the see-saw horses of the merry-go-round at any passing fair ? I ask because never

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yet had I been wholly satisfied by my wife's reply, which is always the same: simply that one could not do it. Why? Because one is forty-six, of course. The point occurred to me that afternoon in connexion with the ridiculous little steam-tram train which rocks and rattles its way between Pontorson and Mont St. Michel. If one balances oneself on the rail of the tiny platform outside the very last third-class car one gets the exact sensation of a merry-go-round as the train swings sharply round the corners of its track; and perfectly innocently, the Lady Next Door being of course unable to see one. To the habitué it is possible that the Pontorson tram is about as prosaic a conveyance as the bus which runs from Hornsey to London and then, stupidly enough, back again from London to Hornsey. But to me it might have been the original magic carpet. I was not, you see, coming back to Pontorson in it, for, as far as I was concerned, its terminus at the foot of the Mont was to be the very terminus of all the trains and trams in the whole world. After that the road, and nothing but the road.

The instructions had been definite on this point. A certain prayer was to be made at St. Malo Cathedral and another at Dol. One took train or bus, or whatever one liked, between them, and so on to Mont St. Michel, shrine of all pilgrims and foreigners in strange lands. And after that no more train or bus—one walked: to Lourdes, down in the Pyrenees on the edge of Spain, six hundred miles, one thousand kilos. One walked through twelve departments. I could remember them all now; there were twelve dioceses, so many shrines, all neatly written down on a pad in the pack on my back. At Solesmes, wherever

that might be, I might expect a letter from home at Poitiers, another hundred miles or so farther on, more money. Nothing could have been more explicit. When the tram-train rattled in another few minutes to its conclusion all that there would be to do would be to carry on. That little Anglican parson with his meditations and mysteries would probably have been surprised at the simplicity of the business.

It is likely that three-quarters of the population of the British Isles have visited Mont St. Michel. When, however, one belongs to the quarter that has not—that has, in fact, never visited anywhere at all—the place possesses much the same qualities as, say, Rio de Janeiro. For the matter of that, the Couesnon rolling gently to the left of the tramway with a barge quite un-English in its shape and colourings might have been the Amazon ; for I was staring at it with the whole-hearted interest due to a mystery river when a fat French-woman standing on the car platform nudged my elbow. ' Le Mont,' she said. It was not hard for her to see I was a foreigner.

Whole libraries, of course, must have been written on that sort of Westminster Abbey perched atop of the Tower of London that they call Mont St. Michel, and not a single line can be added to its literature by myself. If, indeed, one is to own the shameful truth, it is that I never visited it at all in the accepted sense. To some one inquiring months later what I had thought of the famous abbey I had to confess that I had never troubled to get so far, and the remark seemed to perplex him. By what he said, I gathered that some hundreds of thousands of tourists every year visited the Mont and that I

was probably the first in history who had never seen inside the abbey. (I suspect, however, that he left out of count the folk who lived there.) For myself I had no excuse to make ; if there was any fault it must have been in my instructions, which merely set it down that I was to visit the pilgrimage shrine at Mont St. Michel. The abbey itself has long been secularized, and the shrine to-day is the tiny parish church at the Mont's foot. Watching, to be sure of my facts, I saw two little local ' pilgrimages ' arrive—a few Breton women in funny hats, a priest or so in a sort of buttoned-up skirt ; and they all went into the little church. It was then good enough for me.

It must have been the same sort of topsy-turvy reasoning which decided me against spending the night in the little village on the Mont. Every book that I had read mentions the sensation of watching the moonlight on the tide as it ' rushes up the bay with the rapidity of a racehorse '. It was probable, then, that if I stopped I should also see the tide coming in like a racehorse. And I did not want to see something that a couple of hundred thousand other suburban Englishmen had also seen. Now, outside on the real road in the real France, it might be different. Added to this the impatience of the young ladies who touted for their respective hotels from every available standing point in the steep and narrow single lane that forms the Mont's one street made me think rather furiously. Five bob a day I'd got to last me through to Poitiers. It seemed unlikely that they were making all that noise to secure perhaps eighteen pence, the fair proportion out of my allowance for a bed.

One might as well push on a bit and make at

least a start on the actual walk to the south. And as the new nails on my heavy army boots slipped furiously on the cobblestones of the lane, something of a sudden disgust seized me against the place, with its souvenir-sellers chaffering in bad American and worse English at every inch. I would not take the trouble to slip and stagger another quarter of a mile to see their abbey itself. The shrine would content me, and then let us be out of the place.

As I turned out of the blinding sunlight through the little porch into the dark an American coming out jostled against me. With a sort of apology to our common Anglo-Saxondom he explained that he guessed it was the wrong place ; he was looking of course for the abbey itself, and I pointed out its pinnacle towering heaven high over the eaves of the mounting lane. But inside the Bretons and their priests were still there. As one's eyes accustomed themselves to the light one could pick out their motionless shapes, and as the roar of the touts and tourists outside died down one could hear the faint, quick patter of the Breton prayers. My own prayer over, I glanced round at the huge St. Michael, and, suddenly remembering his patronage of foreigners in foreign countries, slipped a copper into his box and lighted one of the untidy, string-like candles that offered themselves to clients for his protection. A minute later, and I was out again in the sunshine and the thousand kilos' walk had really begun.

Once past the row of waiting charabancs that cluster round the gate of the Mont and over the long causeway that prevents it from quite being a real island, and one is in another world indeed. It might almost be an English country-side in a

heat-wave, only with the sun standing at noon instead of at five o'clock in a blazing afternoon. Eight kilos to five miles it used to go in the army. Then if one passes a stone to every ten minutes by the watch it reckons out at three and three-quarter miles to the hour: not such bad going for a man with his complete wardrobe in a pack on his back; and as each time one turns round the towering golden angel on the monstrous peak of the Mont has receded a little farther into the blue of the sky, one swings along with a fine sense of accomplishment. That is another thousandth part of the performance over; and, head pressed steadily to Spain and the south against the pull of the pack, the thing should be easy. All that there is in it should be to keep going. On the performances of Sunday afternoon walks along the Hatfield or St. Albans roads the business was what the pilgrim might call a snip. I can walk twenty miles a day, I ought to be fit enough to keep it up for a month, I do, after all, know enough elementary French words to ask for food (and at the worst one can point), and that is the way one gets to Lourdes. Added also to any advantages one gets by being a proxy pilgrim, there is, I thought, as I swung perspiringly happy through the low-lying Couesnon country, all the fun of the fair in being in foreign parts. Even the advertisements on odd cottage walls looked enticing, the '*Ralentir*' with which every little hamlet oddly named itself a jolly curiosity; until, thinking it over, I remembered that even in England villages bear notices to motorists to 'Slow Down'. Meantime the road, inches deep in a sort of powdered flintstone, was hardly living up to the standards of North London, and the

last kilo-stone or two had shown an annoying reluctance to appear round the corner at the proper mark on my watch. The hour for refreshment was obviously indicating itself, and almost on the thought there appeared the Norman equivalent to a roadside beerhouse. After all '*Ralentir*' may well apply to pilgrims afoot.

The sun in point of fact seemed even at that late afternoon hour too fierce for beer, and as a happy alternative I remembered that the French for cider is about our own word. After a shot or two the pronunciation came out fairly intelligibly, and then arose the delicate question of how much. A kilometre is something less than a mile; it could not be a kilolitre that I wanted, could it? Till, in impatience, I worked it out that home in London a bottle of the stuff cost sixpence, that it was traditionally cheaper here, and that eightpence therefore, or say four francs, ought to buy me a satisfying long drink of it. The untidy-looking girl wanted to argue the point, but as I could not understand one word that she said I merely pointed firmly at my money on the table by the edge of the road. *Tout*, all; *pour*, for; *cidre*, cider. I enunciated my little sentence coldly and with decision. The word had gone out; let it be so. And so it was. Within a minute three old gentlemen emerged from the *estaminet* and took up front places on little iron chairs near my table, and there sat in polite expectation. A second later the girl rushed out with a tiny glass and an enormous ewer, followed by a small brother with a second and similar measure of the liquid. Each then turned indoors again for a further balance of my order, and it was only then that it dawned upon me that I had

miscalculated. There is, it seems, a superior bottled cider which costs its pence, but the ordinary draught stuff of the remote hamlets of Normandy and Brittany is still to be bought in terms of fractional farthings. The village elders to whom I bequeathed my surplus were courteously disappointed in me. They could drink as much cider as they wished any day in the week, but the chance of watching a perspiring Englishman dispose of half a hogshead or so might never come their way again in a lifetime.

Another hour and the red roofs of Pontorson had appeared, only an enormous roadside Calvary at its entrance reminding me that it was not some little market town in the English midlands. What was the name of the little hotel that I found I do not know—nor ever shall; for I had economically picked it on purpose as not being one of the tourist houses shown in the English guide-book. Perhaps it was the 'Pilgrims' Rest'. Anyway, it ought to have been. Of a certainty they had a bed, and though they themselves had not any dinner they pointed to a place round the corner that had. And there on the pavement I sat at a ridiculous little table while about eight courses one after the other appeared and disappeared; and every time that I thought it was finished at last the little waitress brought something else. The charge for the total came to one and eight, cider included, and as I handed over an extra twopence for largesse, with my best attempt under the circumstances at a bow, the entire management beamed approval at me. The gorge over I returned to my 'Rest', and there smoked it off as I sat at a trestle-table and watched a fascinatingly foreign-looking engine shunt in curious

manœuvres past an oddly shaped railway barrier. Home in England I suppose that I could treat my wife most nights a week to a sight of, say, Finsbury Park Station, and yet, curiously enough, I never do. But here, in foreign Pontorson, as the signal lamps twinkled out they might have stood for the beacons of another world. In this fantasy the last cigarette of all was finished and I went reluctantly to bed on my first night in France.

Under a sun more intense than I had conceived from my knowledge of English heat-waves and under the effects of a fatigue more severe than any I had ever anticipated, the memories of the next few days tend to merge themselves into a sort of over-coloured blur of brilliance. As plain, for instance, as though I had seen it to-day in a London street I can picture the truly remarkable cinema advertisement that I came upon somewhere after Pontorson, but exactly where it was I cannot tell. It was either a big village or a small town that I was coming to, and as I approached there was a white-enamelled café with an annexe that looked as though it might be a movie theatre. And here were its advertisements, crude-coloured daubs that showed up but badly against the fierce light of that blinding day. And I was close upon the place when I saw its real attraction, a great silver-and-black cloth that might almost have masked a bier; and by its side was sitting the waxen presentment of a sister, beads and all. Even for the most gruesome murder of Hollywood imagination ever passed by an innocent British censorship one can never have pictured such an advertisement in an English village. And I was actually upon the

thing when I saw the Sister's lips move with her endless petition for the repose of Monsieur le Patron. Of a certainty I was abroad, I thought, as I shambled shamefacedly past with my hat in hand.

Then again there was that other body that I encountered in yet another village. I wish I knew its name, that I might write to its priest and offer my public apology to its congregation; for as I was swinging into its church door, stick in hand, pack on back, there came out a man with a censer and motioned me angrily away. And behind him were others, and last of all a coffin and a priest and mourners. And there stood I awkwardly agape as at a spectacle, afraid to turn away, ashamed to stand still. Does one kneel or merely stand uncovered? I do not know, nor could I find any word of French to explain myself. But this I do know, that all unwittingly I presented but one more instance of the well-known British bad manners.

Not all the incidents, however, were at all funereal. There was the innkeeper, for instance, at some other little town. He, if anything, was too much on what one might perhaps call the secular side of things. Monsieur then was English? Well understood. Then Monsieur without a doubt would as an English gentleman wish to be directed to the such-and-such House of the town. And he really pronounced it as though it deserved a capital letter to tourist ears. It would probably have been worse still had he taken me for an American. Was it really true, somebody asked me, that in Paris young American ladies are in the habit of patronizing a certain agency that lets out high-priced and trusty guides? The object of the guide, it was explained, is to conduct the

young lady to some of the more disgusting of the night-shows of Paris, let her there get well and truly drunk, and then convey her to the parental hotel in all safety and honour. To the obvious disappointment of my interrogator I was unable to make any definite reply. 'We English, you understand, are, since the war, not nearly so wealthy as the luckier Americans.' I gave him at all events to understand that English young ladies are unable to afford luxuries so costly. Not nowadays. It is the War, one sees.

Somewhere, too, there was the elderly priest with whom I fell in on the roadside, and who was kind enough to invite me into his church. As he touched his finger on mine with the Holy Water the Faith was established; but as far as any talk of Lourdes was concerned, he smiled courteously but unconvinced. I was British. Therefore I was a tourist, and no pilgrim, and to turn the conversation he talked about a Norman arch in his nave, while I stared politely at the wrong place. The thing, however, that I really remember about him was that just at the hour when by all the canons of the English rectory he should have asked me to lunch, he suddenly announced that it was now time for him to attend to his cooking and would I care to help with it. He was living, it appeared, in solitary state without even a housekeeper in a presbytery about the size of a British deanery. Proud papacy, it seems, isn't particularly wealthy in the France of to-day. I wish I could remember the names of all these places, but while to the Englishman accustomed to travel they must have seemed but a string of dull villages, to me, used to nothing outside London suburbandom, those days passed in a

dazzling kaleidoscope too rapid to allow of close attention to detail.

In truth, they were not quite as easy as I had promised myself on the first day. France on the map looks so near and friendly, and as one road on one guide-book bears a close likeness to another road on another guide-book there had seemed little difference between walking to Hatfield or St. Albans and walking from the Côtentin to Mayenne. As seen in a close-up the problem was more complicated. Never, for instance, in even the hottest of midsummer days in London had I seen a sun that I had to curse as a personal enemy. Here as I slogged along kilometre after kilometre over roads that seemed to have no shadow in their miles of straightness, the thing might almost have been physically striking at me, hitting me now over the eyes, now over the neck. British, middle-aged, and middle class as I was, I had not the intelligence to adapt my hours to the climate ; and as I staggered over that flinty dust, the pack beating a sort of tattoo on my back, I shook an impotent fist at that blazing blue sky, as bright as the drop scene in any pantomime. I had had a pair of sun-glasses, and I had thrown them away as worse than useless ; for as I raised my hat to every kilo-stone a little eggcupful of tepid moisture used to pour out, and the glasses were steaming over at the fractional kilo-stones. Thirty years earlier I had ' learned French ', and now I wished that of all the week's curriculum we had not selected the ' French hour ' as the proper time to release white mice, and otherwise torment the miserable master. After all those years odd lines of the Iliad and of Horace, taught by masters who did understand serious discipline, kept

coming back to me, but of remembered scraps of French not a Frenchman in All Gaul could understand one spoken word. As a rule it was only by writing them down that I could make my remarks intelligible at all, and even then printed letters were demanded. Ridiculous as it seems, I was staggering across the plains of northern France in the character of a deaf-mute, and to judge by the expression on my readers' faces a semi-imbecile at that.

There were honourable exceptions to the rule, it is true. Witness the case of the Young Lady of Limerick. Let us call it that, for if I wished to I could never rightly pronounce her home-town. She was a singularly pretty young lady, with, one guesses, more than her fair share of admirers. And as if anything was needed to make her still more disliked among her girl friends she must have been boasting of the English lessons which she was taking on the correspondence principle and of her proficiency in our tongue. And here for the first time in history since the Middle Ages comes a real Englishman to the village. It was an opportunity not to be missed, and her giggling friends, one and all, literally pushed the unhappy girl in front of the inn bench where I was cooling off. 'Now talk English,' they obviously said, and crowded round to hear the result. In point of fact not one single word was intelligible to me, but I had guessed what had happened, and was not going to let her down. (Did I mention that she was a singularly attractive young woman?) At all events, at every apparent breakdown of the conversation I took up my end of a perfectly fictitious talk. 'But yes, miss. Of a certainty all we best people in London are of your opinion.'

And by and by they went away, and I gathered that she had passed her exam. with honours. And presently she stole back alone, and, writing in big schoolgirl letters, conveyed to me that she well understood what had happened, that she thanked me very much, and that I was truly *gentil*. It was a much-needed compliment in days that were not wholly complimentary.

Back by Pontorson I had been an English tourist—a little mad perhaps, but none the less welcome for that. But as day by day I trudged south deeper into a district where the tourist was unknown the welcome became a little harder to find. The fine ideal of the Hatfield Road, as translated into French, with a neat little café every couple of miles and a smiling Madame to toss one up some tasty trifle of a three- or four-course simple lunch was rapidly fading into the distance of a dream. Actuality meant rather an endless road as straight as it was shadeless, with a one-street village straggling astride it perhaps twice in the grilling day. And when I found the village, I had not the knowledge easily to pick out the inn from the long rows of other cottages closely shuttered against the glare. Even when discovered it had not the lunch of imagination, if indeed it had anything at all: cold sausage, bread as hard as charity, and beer generally made up the repast. The picture varied, of course. One silhouette I remember of a shady room and an unexpectedly complete meal. And there was a certain something of furtive expectation in the downcast eyes of the almost over-attentive waitress that set me to puzzling out for whom the meal had been got ready, and what class of customer could have been expected at that place

and in that almost wilderness. Can the tales about France be true? There was another roadside bar, the equivalent of a rough English beerhouse, with navvies who must have been working on a light railway construction near by. Rough men they were, as they gnawed at bones at their lunch, and I and my Lourdes made a huge joke to them. Was I a liar or was I more fool? that was the question; and they were all shouting their opinions at once about the Pope and the mugs who believed in him. And then a very ancient woman who was apparently dying all by herself on a heap of rags in the corner over by the sticky bar, caught at the word 'Lourdes' and said something that I could not catch. But every one was quiet quite suddenly, and they made room for me, and somebody pushed me up to the old lady's bedside. And there, as far as I could make out, I either blessed her or she blessed me. I was not sure which, but, anyway, if I ever got to Lourdes I was to remember her name to the Holy Virgin; and, to be quite safe about it, one of the men with great difficulty wrote it down for me. And when I got to Lourdes, I did remember the Widow So-and-So. And I sincerely hope that the Holy Virgin understood my pronunciation. But I expect She would.

Oh, even mealtimes were not all honey in those earliest days, and the trouble was that half the stuff that I did find to eat made me sick. The little French dinner that is such a rare treat in Soho is not always as fine in the French roadside tavern, and my pocket was not paying for better. I reckon that in all I must have passed through about five distinct belts of cookery from end to end of France. By the time I had got my innards

tuned up to the ideas of one particular zone, I was passing into the next area ; and until I got acclimatized, so to speak, I was sick—and sick in places where the sanitation was a bit below par, to say the very least of it. It is an odd thought for a pilgrim, but people have asked me what I was most afraid of in all those hundreds of miles ; and I never dared tell them the truth—that I was most afraid of being sick and losing my false teeth. It is funny what ideas some people have. One old lady asked me months later if I did not find the French tea ' very trying '. I might have done if I had ever seen any, but I never did. Nor any water to drink either. But I could have told her something about lavatories. Only I did not.

Meantime I was just keeping on keeping on, because there did not seem anything else to do about it. One rather curious trick I did pick up. We little Londoners do not do much walking, so I had not much at home to work on as a standard of comparison. But there is a place in Buckinghamshire where I have been going for years, and it is exactly two and a half miles from the garden gate of the house I stop in to the post office in the little market town ; that is, five miles there and back, or, say, eight of those infernal kilos. So that when I used to see one of those roads stretching into infinity I would reckon it out. By the time that I get to that haystack on the horizon I shall have walked as far as the post office. Now I am past the post office and well on the way back to the gate. But then I had got to make the trip several times a day. And it was hotter than it had been in Buckinghamshire. Still, it used to pass the time. There was not much amusement in those early days. I had

reckoned it out at home that one reached a little market town at about perhaps six in the evening. One had one's dinner, simple of course but good, and then one sat at a little table outside a café in the square ('Place' would be its name) and watched the innocent gaiety round the band-stand: innocent, of course, but a little lively for all that. It would amuse the stolid Englishman. What really happened was that after twenty to twenty-five absolutely grilling miles on next to no breakfast, and sausages for lunch, I would strike the Promised Land at perhaps nine at night, about the time that it was going to bed in readiness to get up again by four, and that by the time I had persuaded some one to feed me it was time for bed. If there was any amusement in the little French towns it was me. With my pack and my perspiration I must have been as good as a circus to some of those people.

It was all work and sleep in those days. Once, it is true, I did go out after dinner and promenade the tiny townlet in search of something to do. I had left my pack and stick in the pub, of course, and was just mouching round. It must have been perhaps ten at night, and I was thinking that the French gaiety must be a bit exaggerated because there was not a soul to be seen in the narrow streets, when suddenly a shabby-looking man came running up to me from nowhere in particular. He said something very quickly indeed that I could not catch, and then while I was standing looking at him he made a curiously complicated movement with his foot and kicked me on the shin. Not very hard, but he did. And I was just saying 'Pardon' when he raised his foot to do it again. So I walked away from

him. I did not know whether he was a rare reveller slightly drunk or a robber, or just a hooligan, or what. But when he came after me I stopped, and as there did not seem any possible way of *Entente Cordiale*, and I disliked the idea of being kicked again, it suddenly occurred to me to hit him on the nose—hard. And with the 'plonk' and the noise he made falling down it came to me what an awful and unpilgrim-like thing I had done. Directly opposite me, in the light moon, I could pick out '*Gendarmerie Nationale*' on a whitewashed wall, and I had a vision of a rush of police and a scandal. And my wife not being a bit pleased about it. But, instead, nothing happened at all. And while I was standing watching, he got up and slipped away into the silent shadows without a word. So I never knew who he was, or what he had wanted. But he was holding his nose.

All the next day, as I tramped along, I kept turning round to see if there was any pursuit; mounted *gendarmerie*, or perhaps on motor-cycles. I had heard that the French police with their dossier system were wonderful at detection work, though in point of fact I can see now that it would have been pretty easy to detect me all over France. But nothing happened at all. So he did not seem to have made an international incident out of it. I was glad about that for my wife's sake.

II

LAVAL, according to the guide-book, has two ancient castles which deserve the attention of every English visitor. I did not see either of them.

In point of fact I did not see much of Laval at all beyond a big square with trees all round it and a lot of tables with people sitting under the trees. And there were very young-looking soldiers in their very hot-looking steel helmets walking about in twos and threes—I suppose because they had not got the money to pay to sit down. Very few of them, by the way, were with girls, presumably because in France the conscript is a commonplace and not a hero. I thought they looked rather forlorn, and I was sorry for them. I did carry my pack because I wanted to, but they were wearing their helmets because they had got to—being a great national holiday demanding full dress. And then they had not got twopence to spend on any of the gaieties. It was really its being the national holiday that prevented my seeing anything, because the old priest to whom I had an introduction there thought it an occasion inadvisable to be in the streets after six or so ; so that as his guest I was in a sense confined to barracks. The barracks, of course, was his establishment, and when one passed the lodge from the blinding glare of the little lane outside and was admitted by the lay Sister who sat there, so to speak, sentry, one was in a little clerical world all its own, its curtained corners and saints' statues forming an atmosphere as of a fortress defying the blaring bands and glaring fireworks outside its walls. It came as a bit of a change from the road.

Everything was so ordered and so quiet and cool and decent ; and everything and everybody had its or his place. Here, for instance, was the Reverend Superior, and he could not have been anyone but the Reverend Superior. And here the Father who taught German ; and one felt he

would teach it better than I had been taught French. My own particular Father of course taught English. And then, the correct courtesies observed, they all demanded how best they could serve me, and seemed a little surprised when the first and only place I wanted was Notre Dame de Priz. Because it is really a deserted shrine to-day, only I had not known that. The guide-book could not have known it either, because it stood on my list of places to be visited. So, of course, I had got to visit it. Behold us, then, one little French priest in his skirt-like soutane and one Englishman in the filthy flannels of days of dust, setting out under the baking afternoon sun along the chalky path that leads by the river bank out of the town. Past where the little steam tramway-train turns off the road and past a mill, and leaving the track, one enters an orchard, and there behind an old farm-house stands the derelict church. In the history books of the Middle Ages it figures large as a place of pilgrimage, but to-day its rare visitors steal in by ones and twos to beg Monsieur the farmer's permission to enter its ancient walls: not so very rare, perhaps, after all, for every inch of its woodwork is covered with pencilled petitions, their modernity in violent contrast to the crude-carved images that date from other centuries. 'Pray hard, dear Mother Mary, that within the year I may find a husband.' That pilgrim, one thinks, will have walked the mile and a half from the city alone. 'Pray your hardest, dear Lady, that I may grow up quickly into a big man, to take a sword and kill the enemies of France.' That one, the pity is, may have made the little pilgrimage with a mother in black. If anyone searches closely among the thousands of scrawls he may pick out

over there to the left my own request in fair English that I might get to Lourdes. I did. Let us hope that the unknown petitioner also found the husband desired, and that he was all that he should have been. They are not always—so I am told.

Somewhere over near one of the castles there is a sort of little park from whose slopes one can see over miles of sunny valley. It used, they say, to be a private garden. And then the rich man who owned it took to gaming. Night by night he would sit playing with his friends in the mansion over there, until in the dawn of one such morning as this he found with the last hand that he lost house and garden and all. One thinks that as he took the last look over the walled edge of the almost precipice down on to the town below he must have realized what the loss meant to his children, if he had any. The story was told me while I was waiting the hour for High Mass at the cathedral close by. The great High Mass it had to be, and no lesser function might serve. My old priest was courteously insistent upon the point, anxious perhaps for the rare Englishman in Laval to see the very best that its great church might offer. I was especially lucky that day, it seemed, for My Lord the Bishop himself was present. And there, with all the marvels of the thundering organ and the rolling clouds of incense smoke, the gentleman in a sort of lifeguard's uniform clanging his javelin on the pavestones of the great nave, and the rest of it, My Lord held solemn progress round his cathedral church. Just in front of me were two small girls—naughty little girls at that—and as the procession approached they positively scuffled for possession of the end seat and probable

facility to kiss My Lord's episcopal hand in token of humility. I saw them at it, fighting hard. And the Bishop, old, old gentleman as he seemed, saw them too, and there in all the purple pageantry of his progress stopped dead to give them both a chance.

Later on my good Father escorted me round the town on quite a round of social calls. It may be, perhaps, that he had a little pride in showing off his Englishman and his English. After all, if one taught French for twenty years in England and then a Frenchman came, might not one show off a little! But of course I may have been all wrong. Anyway, there we were with our latest friends, an obvious mother and daughter, when it occurred to some one to inquire *pourquoi*, why on earth the man was walking to Lourdes. In French it was, but this time I did catch it and was for an instant intrigued as to the answer, for, after all, my priest knew not a word about wife or baby. But without a second's hesitation the little old gentleman answered for me: '*Pour pénitence*', and while *Mamon* looked down her thoroughly religious nose, I thought that in the quite fine eyes of the younger lady I caught a passing gleam of interest. But I very much wonder how he knew; for until that moment I had never thought of it myself. But for an instant the tumult of the celebrations away over in the great square seemed to fade a little lower.

Somewhere on the road from Laval there is another shrine of local pilgrimage. I could find my way there to-day! but I could not describe it. There is a great high road, bordered with trees for shade like a real French road should be, and there is a village where they were holding up all the

traffic. I thought it must be for a motor bandit at least, but it appeared that it was only the start of a cycle road-race. There was a whole row of them waiting for the pistol, and the road cleared for their first mile or so. It is just past there that you turn off for the shrine, and when you come to it, you find a field laid out in a sort of miniature of the Holy Places. There's the Mount, and the place of Calvary, and the house of Pilate, and all the rest of it. And you go round them on your knees, saying the appropriate prayers at each. They are all set out for you in neat French carved on the stones. I had a moment's hesitation whether to remove my pack and do it in light marching order or not, but decided to be on the safe side. It is extraordinary how hot one gets over it, but when it is all over one finds that with Latin logic they have provided near the last station of all a little place where you can get a glass of beer: a sort of uncovenanted reward for the pack, as when I started I honestly did not know it was there.

Now the name of the next place I can remember, and for a peculiar reason. It is Sablé sur-Sarthe, and it is mentioned in one of Huysman's novels as one of the most degraded little towns in northern France. There are people, I have been told, born into this world with an unhealthy sense of curiosity, and I remember years ago prowling down a little alley off Regent Street one dark, drizzling November afternoon. That was about the time that all the world was whispering of Huysman's *Lá Bas* and his curious revelations of Satan worship. Then there was a gentleman on the Continent making money by showing a fox's brush, exhibited as the devil's tail torn off at some satanistic orgy. And

I was staring down off Regent Street hunting for the Satan worship temple which they had whispered lay that way. Most certainly I did not want to worship the devil myself, but I did very badly want to see the outside of the famous temple ; but all I found was some warehouses and backs of drapery shops. Perhaps they were the temple. The thirty-year-old memory of boyhood curiosity came back to me in Sablé, as I stared down its little badly-paved lanes all empty in the blinding sunlight. I do not know what I expected : Perhaps a big notice, 'This Way to Worship the Devil.' But there was not one, or if there was I could not translate it. The only notice I saw had something to do with a circus which had been there the month before last. So perhaps Huysman's adjective 'degraded' only meant that Sablé had failed to interest him. Its church organ may not have come up to his finer sensibilities. I heard it booming away through the open doors of a village church about the size of a miniature St. Paul's Cathedral. But then, as I've also been several times told, I haven't any finer sensibilities. I'm rather glad about it. Huysman apparently could only find about one church in a thousand that met with his complete approval. It must have given him a lot of trouble.

A couple of miles or so beyond Sablé and one comes to Solesmes Abbey. Now, to be frank about it, I was distinctly nervous of the place. There are good Catholics, I know, who make a practise of week-ending in monasteries and the like. Indeed, I know people who speak of 'Dear Dom This' and 'Good Father That', rather with the air of comparing the spiritual bills of fare at

rival ecclesiastical boarding-houses; but I had never been of such. My point of view was that one ought to do one's parades and keep one's buttons moderately clean, but that the man who prowled round the orderly-room was liable to hit up trouble. Anyway, all my life, parades once over, I had promptly made myself very scarce. Bringing the metaphor back to brass tacks, the truth was that never before had I been inside a monastery gate. What on earth did they do with one when one got inside?

What they did to me was to direct me in dumb show to a small room in a little building just outside the monastery proper, but within its precincts, as indicated by a small and rickety garden door which I could easily have opened if I had wanted to. So far, so good. I could then get away if necessary. Meantime they motioned me to sit down and wait, handing me the letter from home which I had been expecting. My baby, it appeared, was better; and while it was pointed out to me that by this time I had presumably walked two hundred kilometres, the Infant had put on two ounces. So that was that, though, incidentally, the Infant's father must have lost far more than any two ounces in perspiration. And waiting, I glanced round my new home. There is a type of maiden lady, I was thinking, who makes her pride to prepare her guest chamber 'just so'—fresh soap here, towel there, and for a gentleman guest the matches and the ash-tray. And here it was precisely the same: fresh holy water in a neat little stoup, the newest of spotless linen, a little rack of devotional books. And while I was trying to read their titles, there tapped modestly at the door a real medieval monk, tonsure and all. He

was, as he introduced himself in English so perfect as to be not even in the least laboured, my special host for my stay, and it would be his duty to attend to my wants, both spiritual and material. For the matins, for instance, of four o'clock next morning (he assumed as a matter of course that it would be my wish to attend) it was possible that I might desire some little help in the finding of the proper places in the prayer books on my table. And for other matters, there was the question of my socks. If I would be so good as to change into those he had brought on his arm they should be attended to. And back my filthy stuff came in spotless order a few hours later. And I verily believe that my host had personally washed them with his own monkish hands. We had quite a lot of talk, that monk and I, for, for one hour and a half a day, we had willy-nilly to 'recreate', and recreation meant walking at a tremendous pace up and down the immaculate monastery garden talking. About everything: the London traffic problem, the prospects of the next English Government—anything. And that French gentleman was a far better educated man than myself, even in the things of this world. They 'let him out sometimes', it appeared, and he knew the Athenaeum Club in London and the British Museum, and a lot of other places that I did not. But 'let him out' was not the right term, he told me. 'Turned him out', he said, would be nearer the mark. But the striking thing about it was that at the very moment of the bell that announced the end of recreation he suddenly would cease to be a well-informed gentleman of the world and turn mysteriously into a monk. In recreation, any subject. A minute after recreation things spiritual if one wanted, but

nothing else. And if I did not want him, I would see him in the garden with a gang of other monks drawing a cart of manure or at some such task, and he would not speak to me.

They worked, those people. The first morning I was up at three, anxiously waiting for the four o'clock service in the huge, dim chapel; and I felt a beast about it, because I had not in the least wanted to be up at three, or anything like it. I did not in a monastery exactly expect my breakfast in bed, but it was my idea that I had been doing a walk of such fatigue as seldom comes the way of many middle-aged men, that this was supposed to be my rest time, and that a call somewhere about seven or so would be my mark. I could have had it too. There was no compulsion about getting up early; only my host simply took it for granted that I should want to be up for that four o'clock service. I did go, but it made me feel mean. That service and others after carried on until nearly eight, and at I think the quarter past I got what they called breakfast—and I did not. Most certainly those monks did not pamper themselves to British notions. At ten o'clock came another service, and the Papal Legate was received. He was one guest, I was another. But I did not feel proud of my trousers. Then came lunch and recreation, another service in the afternoon, dinner and more recreation, one more service, and then bed. It was uncommonly hard work resting in that monastery.

For all that the chapel was worth it. I am not, as I said, a connoisseur of churches; and, as a matter of fact, in spite of all my monk's anxious care I never managed to keep my prayer book places through all that ritual. It was nearly dark,

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too, at my end of the church, and the monks' lighted-up part at the other end, down a huge sort of stone forest of pillars and arches, might have been in another world. That was a bit like how their music sounded, once the organ had given its single note to start them and the monks were chanting on their own. The absolutely regular rise and fall of the volume of sound might have been the breaking of waves of the sea on a beach just beyond eyeshot; that was the sort of effect it had on me. But then I am not educated about music. I know, though, there is something wonderful about the Solesmes chant, because I have read of it. Besides, there was at the monastery a fellow who had come all the way from Philadelphia to study it.

There were quite a lot of guests there besides the Papal Legate and myself. Next to me at table, for instance, was a French general with a funny little pointed beard and his chest all covered with a sort of cuirass of medal ribbons. I know he was a general, because it said so on a bit of paper fastened to his napkin ring. And while none of the other guests ever spoke to me, M. le General used to make rather a point of it, perhaps because he was my neighbour in the next room to me in the bailiff's cottage sort of guest-house. Whenever we met, for instance, we used to shake both hands at once, and then he would make his little speech: 'You English soldier, I French soldier. We Allies.' Then we would both bow. I did think of being honest with him, but could not think of French enough to tell him that I had never got higher than being a lance-corporal. Out of recreation of course we merely bowed at each other.

Dinner was a bit of an ordeal in that place.

Where you dine is about the size of the nave of Westminster Abbey, stained-glass windows and all. And at the great door one is greeted by the Lord Abbot. One kneels and kisses his ring, and then he raises one up and ceremonially washes the guest's hands over a silver basin. After a walk like mine it is a little point just as well for the guest to know in advance. Then one walks up that enormous hall to the guest-table in the middle of the far end ; and as one walks each separate monk out of what seems hundreds bows individually : bows properly, too—low down from the waist. And on the pavement of that silence the clank of iron-shod army boots seems almost a sacrilege. One eats, of course, in silence unbroken but for the single monk reader in his pulpit, with his great mouth-filling sentences in slow and sonorous French. I had always thought it a quick-sounding tongue, but here the words seemed to roll out slowly with something of the effect of a proclamation and trumpet-calls. I could only catch a word here and there, but even the mere sound of it all made me think that French must have been a fine language for fighting men back in the fierce old Middle Ages. Through one pane of ruby glass in the window opposite the low evening sun was sending a ray like blood, and somehow, the monks sitting bolt upright, none speaking to any other, and those resonant sentences in fine French rolling off like the taps of a drum, it all made me suddenly think of a book called the *Holy War*. Which was odd. Because I have never read it. And there was another pane of yellowish glass, and through it I could see some peasants working in their fields across the river that circles the huge abbey moat-fashion. With the yellowed sun full on them they

gave the effect of figures in a stained-glass window. It was the world outside—so it seemed for a moment—that was unreal and painted. The only real world was here inside that great dim-vaulted hall. Like being in a fortress beleaguered by an enemy.

If one is to think of these monks as soldiers, then at least they must make an army of unequalled discipline. Awful is hardly the word I want. Awesome, perhaps. The dignity with which that simple meal was invested was awesome. Every merest act seemed to have the solemnity of pageanted ritual. Once somebody dropped something—perhaps a crust or a fork, and it might have been a bombshell—and in an instant the monk was up and out of his place, and then down again prostrate on the stone floor in abject penance. And he too may, for all I know, have been a gentleman of elderly scholarship, an honoured guest at Athenaeum clubs and British museums. But it made me awfully nervous with my forks and things. They have got them all differently arranged in France, too. As it was, there was a bit of difficulty at the end of the meal. My Lord Abbot looks round from his table, a little mallet in hand, to ensure that all have finished. And when he glanced at me I was nervously fumbling with a crust. So down went that mallet again, and sitting as it were at the 'attention' we listened to another few minutes of the rolling French from the pulpit. But when My Lord looked again I had my hands properly at my side. Down came the mallet, the French sentence came to an end, and the Latin grace was chanted. I tried to walk out on tiptoe. And failed.

Smoking was a thing that I missed most badly

for the first few hours. In fact, between times I stole out into the great grounds by myself, and lighted a furtive cigarette behind a bush on the bank where the kitchen side of the great building drops suddenly down to the river. And then a little later my host unexpectedly asked me if I did not want to smoke. And I told him all about it. How I did want to. But how I had thought it might be a rather unsporting thing for a guest to do. My idea was that all those monks must once have been ordinary men, and that most of them must have smoked and then given it up. And I had thought that perhaps if they smelled it again it would be a temptation to them. 'Then,' said my host, 'you had a sort of vision of the father abbot and all the monks and novices sniffing your tobacco, and in desperation breaking their vows and rushing back into the world?' In a monkly way he seemed rather amused about it; in fact, very amused. But I gathered that the sons of St. Benedict had progressed at least beyond the stage of that particular temptation. So, after that, between parade times, so to speak, I used to walk about where I would smoking publicly and unashamed; and every monk I used to meet at their various tasks, mostly in huge hats of coarse-weaved straw, used to salute me silently at every meeting. Some smiled with grave courtesy, as aged gentlemen at a child. There was one young brother who used to give a regular grin of purest happiness. But one and all they smiled and bowed. And I asked my host the why of it all. 'You can hardly,' he replied, 'speak any words of French at all, and I fear that you will read it very badly indeed. But if you look at the third book in the shelf on the table in your room, the sixth

chapter, the fourth section, the first sentence. I think that you will be able to understand the answer to your question.'

So I did look, and he had got the reference right to a comma. And what it said was that under the Constitution of our Holy Founder, St. Benedict, every person of whatever degree admitted to the house in the quality of a guest was to be treated in all respects as though he were the Lord Christ Himself. So I had got my answer.

It is all very well saying one does not mind walking through France for a particular reason. And I was ever so pleased about the Infant's two ounces. But that sort of thing, it fairly hits one over the head like a battleaxe. At least it did me.

III

I LEFT early next morning, and my last memory of Solesmes was of its monk gate-porter. He had not a single word of English to say 'Good-bye', but to make up for it he stood in his little lodge door smiling and waving with all his might until I was actually out of sight. I might have been his lifelong comrade instead of as bewildered an Englishman as had ever entered the place. I had not known that monks were like that. It seemed, on reflection, that I had not known anything about them at all, and the reflections were so strong that it was not until several kilometres had passed that I was able to come quite back to material things. Solesmes, considered in a purely mundane light, had on the whole been a distinct success. First and foremost, there had been my home-letter and the Infant's

two ounces. Excellent. Next, I had entered the place with feet that could not have gone much farther. Blisters had started the second day, and I had pricked them. And more blisters had come, and blister had run into blister, until the foot was practically all blister. But the monks had promptly produced some sort of ointment stuff that might, for all I know, have come down from the medieval pilgrim days. Anyway, it had done the trick, and I was leaving Solesmes hale and hearty once more. It is fair while on the subject to say that never again in my whole thousand kilometres did I have the slightest foot trouble: the monks may have permanently exorcized all blisters away. Anyway, weeks later I landed in Lourdes with feet of the consistency of pure horn. It was one more thing to be grateful for. A third point was that thanks to my monk host I could once more boast a clean shirt and clean socks. But here consideration was less satisfactory; for it ought not to have been necessary for him to have washed them at all. As it was, he had just saved my bacon; but it was a proof that my own resources had failed. If I must go into details—and one can scarcely walk across a foreign country without them—my idea had been that with one shirt on my back and two in my pack, one for 'best' and one to sleep in, and a couple of pairs of spare socks, I ought to be quite all right. And so I might have been, only the whole plan of campaign depended upon perfect staff-work in the rushing up of reliefs of clean clothes, and my reliefs had broken down already. Because there had been none waiting for me at Solesmes. At home it had all seemed so easy. I should be at such and such a

place on such and such a day, and my wife would post me a weekly parcel to reach me in good time : just as if we had been talking about the Hornsey parcel post and a tourist walking up the Hatfield Road. We had not known about parcels in France, and that they do not even go by post at all but are dealt with by the railways. There was not a station at Solesmes, and though I had walked to the nearest railway and had tried to make myself understandable to the half-dozen women who were doing one man's work in its parcels office, nobody could find anything for me. Added to all this, I'd gone and broken up my own time-table. That flying start from Pontorson of which I had been so proud had put me half a day ahead the very first day, and then by extra hard walking I had put myself another half-day out of gear another time. It was not as easy and as regular as the Hatfield Road at all ; probably exactly the same thing would happen at the next point where I expected a parcel. The fact was that I was alone in France, and as I had not enough money to buy fresh things, even if I had known enough French to ask for them, or to work out my sizes in neck and feet in kilometres, or whatever they were, and even if there had been any shops to buy things at, which there were not, I was really absolutely dependent upon what I was carrying. And that did not seem to be much.

On my first real day's walking I had started out of Pontorson by begging the Madame at the inn for a hunch of bread and cheese for lunch, and had put it in my pack. Then the sun had melted it into a sort of poultice, and the stuff had spread itself over one of my shirts. At the time the little question of whether to eat my shirt or wear my

lunch had seemed a bit of a joke. But it was not quite so funny now. The monks had certainly started me off again clean enough, but how long was I going to keep clean? The spoiling of an odd shirt is not quite so comic when there is not a prospect of another one in sight. Then even if by some chance things worked out absolutely correctly at every changing point, I was not so sure of myself in other respects. It would take many clean shirts to balance up my trousers, and I had not bargained for a spare of them at all. One pair of very old grey flannels, absolutely bleached by the sun and coated by several shades of flint-dust, that was all I had got. I had knelt in them once or twice on the marshy edges of roadside pools, when I had been trying to fill my hat with water, and that had not done them much good. My hat itself was hardly the hat it had been. In Hornsey it had been selected out of several of my more ancient hats as just the very thing for an unconventional stroll through rural France. Now looking at it, might I be depilgrimed if I could honestly consider it just the hat for any purpose at all. And so it was with just about everything I had got. My wrist-watch had gone wrong the first day, and as I had not the money for a new one or the time to get it mended, I was walking watchless. I was learning for the first time in my pre-Boy Scout Age life to tell the time by the sun, and as I was mostly walking due south it was not so hard. But even that was always leading to uncertainties. France has got two times. A little town will work on summer time, and then the next village I came to would be an hour out—church clock, inn, farmers, and all, ignoring the official time altogether and working

in a sort of recognized conspiracy *par soleil*. It had been a bit confusing at first, though now I was getting used to things.

And I was getting used to them.

On the whole I had a good deal to be thankful for. My boots at any rate were as good as new. Better, in fact. When I had bought them for fourteen and six in the Holloway Road, army pattern, extra ironed, they had been a bit stiff. They had given nicely now; and though I had certainly rotted away a pair of laces with pure perspiration I had plenty more of those. I was all right, even if I arrived at Lourdes in my boots and nothing else. And, swinging along, rejuvenated by my two days' rest, I presently arrived at a turning off the great South Road with a signpost to Notre Dame du Chêne. This was one of the shrines set down in my schedule, and I had got to visit it.

What happened there in the Middle Ages and what miracle Our Lady of the Oak performed I frankly do not know. It is all set down on the stained-glass windows of the huge church, about the size of Brompton Oratory, only I could not read the writing. But I do know that miracles still happen and that pilgrims still come. There is the church, and an inn, and a small booth where they sell rosaries and statues, and there are half a dozen old ladies with huge umbrellas sitting in the blinding glare selling candles on the church steps. That is all there is, except the pilgrims. There is a special little station for them on the tram-train railway. There has to be, because they come by the thousand. They walk as well. I saw some of them.

How do I know that miracles still happen?

Because on the half mile from the main road I had passed a pair of pilgrims: an obvious farm labourer in his obvious best clothes with his anxious-faced wife, the couple taking turns in carrying a child with something the matter with one of her legs, which was in irons. I had not known of course where they were going to, else I would have tried to offer to help with the little girl. Only, for all I knew, they might have been bound for some place miles farther on. I had noticed them especially, because as I had passed I had wondered about the man's clothes. Out there in that blinding desert one would not have put on that wonderfully embroidered and extraordinarily hot-looking waistcoat for nothing, and yet I knew of no holiday. Then, five minutes later, they caught me up in the church, and of course I knew then. One would put on one's best to visit the Queen's Court. For all I know, that wonderful waistcoat may have been as favoured as any bishop's purple. Whether there was a miracle that time or not I do not know. But there must have been sometimes; for those French peasants are not fools at all, but a singularly practical people. They do not put up halts on their railways for nothing, and that Brompton Oratory standing in the middle of a sort of desert must mean something. I was very certain about that. But what happened to that particular little cripple I shall never know: only while I was staring at her it came into my mind what was happening to my own Infant, and so one more shrine, so to speak, ticked off, I picked up again the happy tramp along that never-ending road to the blazing south.

Hour after hour it went on, and though I did not

know it at the time, I must somehow have overdone the job. It may have been that I was what I think they call *exalté*, or I may have been a plain ordinary silly ass, but somehow I had got it into my head that day that whatever happened I was just going on. The road was longer and lonelier than ever. It did not matter. I was going on. There was less shade than ever. I was going on. There was nothing to eat. I was going on. It had got into my head, like a sort of chant to the rhythm of the monk's music. France versus Myself. And then quite suddenly, without the faintest warning, France won—with a knock-out blow that weeks later a doctor told me must have been a touch of sunstroke. Or perhaps heat-stroke. I forget which he said. Anyway, it is unpleasant. It is like a red-hot half-crown suddenly applied to the back of the neck, and its effect was to send me staggering into the ditch under the nearest bit of shade that I was just able to pick out. There I suppose I must have dozed off a bit.

When I woke up again I found that I had been violently and unpleasantly sick, and I was cold all over. Incidentally the sun was a good bit lower. As far as I could reckon I must have been there about two hours. I felt my pockets. That at least was all right. My money was still there. For the matter of that, I do not suppose that anyone had passed at all. That road was inconceivably lonely to our ideas. But even if there had been anyone, he probably would have taken no notice of me. I had always thought that the French were a fussy people, 'demanding' this and that and wanting to know the stranger's business. But my experience so far had been that

they were infinitely more 'keep to themselves' than we are. My honest opinion is that if anyone started to climb Mont Blanc with a piano on his head every Frenchman who met him would turn politely away. 'If,' they seem to say, 'the *Bon Dieu* in His Almighty Wisdom has seen fit to create a fellow human slightly mad, it is surely a little impolite to stare.' Anyway, nobody had touched me or mine. My money was safe. Only when I fell to counting it over again, though it was certainly all there, there did not seem much of it. On the dollar a day basis I could just about manage another five days of it, which should just carry me into Poitiers and fresh supplies. But there would hardly be sixpence to spare. And suddenly the sun seemed to have lost a lot of its remaining glare. A sort of chilly shadow fell over the world.

There used to be a time just after the war when I had what I think the doctor calls a 'phobia'—a violent wave of unnatural fright without anything to be particularly frightened about. And I got a touch of the thing again. Here I was alone in the middle of France, and I could not speak their beastly language; and I had not got money enough for my fare home, even if there had been a nice, ordered English station round the corner. And there was not a station at all that I knew of for miles and miles. There was not anything—not even anything to eat. And I did not feel at all well. And as I stood up, almost trembling with pure funk, I believe that if I could have seen England and home and Hornsey—nice, prosaic, uninteresting, friendly Hornsey—in the distance, I would have cut and run for it. If I could have seen it, whatever the distance, I would never have

stopped running. But of course I did not see anything of the sort. And as I stood the funk feeling gradually wore thinner, till I was able to pick up my pack again, clean the thing as best I could on the grass, and hitch it on. I could not get back if I wanted to, and anyway I did not want to, so I might as well get on with the job. And I cannot have been so very bad after all, for ten minutes later I was striding along nearly as well as ever. Let us see what happens next. And there suddenly came into my mind a ridiculously untrue couplet that I must last have heard in childhood full forty years before from my father, who now no doubt knows better. Something, it ran, about

Three Skinny Frenchmen,
Two Portuguee,
One Jolly Englishman,
Beat all Three

That was of course before the days of the *Entente Cordiale*!

Not, mark you, that I was really particularly jolly just at the moment, but I had somehow pulled my socks up again, and the sun had come out, and, anyway, I was going on southwards. And so I did. And after an hour or two I hit up against a hamlet at last. So that was all right. Only, as it happened, it was not. For here, though I had not the sense to know it at the time, I got a knock really far more dangerous than any sunstroke. The Madame at the village pub was suspicious about serving me. But certainly, there was something to drink, only, in effect, let us see your money first.

It was precisely as though I had walked into a

decent London hotel and they had greeted me with, ' Not this side, please ' ; and for the moment I was exactly as staggered. But of course I had some money, and on the instant the Madame had been miraculously converted into the smiling and attentive innkeeper that I had been seeing for the last hundred and fifty miles. And a little apologetic as well. I was then English, of course, and amusing myself as the English will on a tour of the feet. It was a caprice of mine. I remember her word as she looked at me. And then as I caught sight of my reflection in a glass I stared a little too. At best I was not much to look at nowadays, and as considered from the Beau Brummel point of view that recent little matter of the sickness had not exactly done me much good. If one was to put it absolutely baldly, I looked like a tramp, and a filthy one at that. ' Caprice ', I thought, was rather a tactful way of putting things. Meantime Madame had made a very natural mistake ; Madame was apologizing for it as fast as her tongue would let her ; here, after about twelve hours, was something to drink at last, and all was well with the world. The incident —I waved my glass expressively at her—was over.

In point of fact, if I had had the wits to realize it, the incident was just beginning ; for with Madame's first refusal to serve me I was definitely beginning a new chapter in my tramp. The tourist, so says the guide-book, will find himself heartily welcomed all over France. *' Mais non dans ces pantalons '*, I should like to tell Mr. Guide-book Editor, and the sentence would neatly express at once my sentiments, my knowledge of French, and my general get-up. Of course the English tourist is welcomed all over France.

Only after a certain point nobody believed that I was a tourist at all. And at this particular pub I had reached that point. Nor, for the matter of that, did anyone as a rule believe that I was English at all. Why should they? None of us, it seems, ever comes to that part of the middle of France; or, if they do come, they travel in cars and never stop anywhere. 'You say that you are English,' it was once put to me. 'Where then is your beautiful automobile?' He voiced the national sentiment so far as I could see!

On the other hand, France is used to the stray Pole, Italian, or Spaniard. The Republic, I gathered, had no out-of-works of her own, and in fact had been driven to import thousands of navvies from less fortunate countries to do her road-making and so forth. The obvious foreigner, then, trudging the Grand Routes in a state of awful dilapidation and with a pack on his back, automatically became an Italian, Spaniard, or Pole—anything, in fact, but the trim English tourist. I myself was nearly always a Pole. At one place farther on they fetched out another Pole and introduced us to one another as brothers in exile. And twice I was a German, which is rather an awkward thing to be in Undiscovered France. No, the business was far more serious than my little touch of sun. At that particular pub in some hamlet whose name I cannot remember, somewhere on the edge of Sarthe and Maine-et-Loire, I crossed a boundary far more important than any mere limit of a department. I ceased to be a British tourist and became a foreign tramp, genus unknown but character, anyway, suspicious. And the change was going to make a whole world of difference to me. Only that I did not know yet.

All I knew was that an out-of-the-way inn had made rather a silly mistake, that it had been put right again, that I felt better now, and that I might as well be getting on. And by about eleven that night I had hit the little town of Baugé, and after not more than a quarter of an hour's explanation had persuaded a very jolly little inn to feed me and take me in. It was the perfect ending to a day that had been far from perfect.

Saumur next day made another late arrival. Not because I was sick on the way, but because, warned by the sunstroke business, I deliberately went canny and slept away all the noontide hours. I was learning to adjust myself a bit. London clerks' hours would not function out here. As early in the morning as you like and as late at night. But no more midday tramping. And so it must have been nine or so at night when I hit the outskirts of the place. Barring St. Malo, where I had been a tourist just off the boat, and Laval which had not counted because I had had a place to go to there, this was the first real town that I had struck so far ; and it was not too easy. In a village there is always a somebody with time to spare. And a stranger—even a tramp—makes a bit of a novelty. They will often fetch out some one who thinks he can speak a bit of English. Anyway, your case will be considered. But it is quite another business to enter a decent-sized town late in the evening and looking like a dead-beat.

The first trouble in the dreary street that stretches its wearisome way to the north was that there were no lights. As I could not then pick out the signs, I had to try on chance every house behind whose windows there seemed to be revelry. It might be an inn. Or, again, it might not ; and

I fancy that at least one respectable suburban household of Saumur was considerably surprised by the apparition of a foreign tramp demanding a lodging in halting French. And the second trouble is that there seem to be no police to make inquiries of. Later on I was told indignantly that there are *agents* in the town, and equally indignantly that of course most of them go off duty early in the evening, there being nothing for them to do. This almost total absence of crime in provincial France has its drawbacks for the stranger. Let us thank Heaven that in Protestant Hornsey they do not withdraw all the police about six o'clock. For it makes difficulties for the foreigner. I, at least, was the best part of an hour trying my way down that beastly street, and then I had no luck at that ; for of the two or three little inns that I did find not one would even consider me. In the centre of the town, of course, would be lights in plenty, and real hotels as well. One or two of them were even named as ' recommended ' to the traveller in the guide-book in my pack. But that, I was beginning to reflect, was not at all the same thing as saying that the traveller was well recommended to them, and in fact I was more than doubtful whether any of them would look at me. Meantime one might as well keep on walking and trying. And so, Felix-like, I presently came upon the station quarter, with its two or three hotels of the commercial class, just as it would be at home. The first two I tried, on the instant they saw my get-up in the lights of their halls, were decisively ' full '. In despair I tackled the third, the last of the little group. It was obviously the biggest and best of the three, and I entered it something as a matter of form, metaphorically

tucking up my coat tails and preparing for the inevitable kick-out.

And then something of a miracle happened; for a manager sort of gentleman the instant that he set eyes on me grasped me enthusiastically by the hand and led me without listening to my explanations straight into his *salon*. And there, plastered with the dust of a day's march, pack still on my back, army boots and all, I found myself in a small assembly of the most elegant. Behind a small table opposite us sat a happy-looking and smiling Madame, and flanking her, so to speak, a bunch of obvious waitresses and chambermaids. It must have been their floral offerings that stood on the table, labelled 'Compliments de Suzanne' and so forth. In opposition to Madame and her staff stood a semicircle of prosperous-looking and clean Frenchmen—at a guess the commercial gentlemen who would form the hotel's natural habitual clients. At the extreme end of the semicircle stood myself, a very big glass of champagne pushed hurriedly into my hand. Apparently I had arrived only just in time. I was rather glad about it. I should have hated for anyone to have been disappointed.

Taking our time, then, from the gentleman at the extreme other end of the semicircle we raised our glasses with military precision and performed the usual evolutions; after which Madame, blushing quite prettily, rose and made a short speech, of which not one single word was intelligible to myself. We bowed and broke away from the formation. One of the Suzannes then handed round some sweet biscuit things, and the function was at an end. What exactly it was I never discovered—Madame's birthday? the anniversary

of the opening of the hotel? a wedding feast? I never knew. Perhaps a private vow on the part of Monsieur the Patron to take in the first dirty-looking man who applied at exactly twenty to eleven, or perhaps I had made the fourteenth man. But whatever it was I had come in the nick of time, had behaved exactly correctly, had done precisely the right thing. For the commercial gentlemen congratulated me on my behaviour. Every one was most affable about it all, and even though I could hardly understand a word that anyone said, I got the general impression that I had been a clever fellow to have entered at that exact minute. And afterwards they found me a room, and, late though it was, a meal, and I was treated just like any other hotel guest. As I left the house next morning and paid the modest reckoning there was on it no word about champagne.

Now according to the guide-book Saumur is a notable place, not only being a head-quarters of French Protestantism but also having in its cavalry museum the skeleton of our English 'Flying Fox'. I would rather have liked to have seen 'Flying Fox', for I am old enough to remember his Derby. I won over it. And doubtless the Protestant Temple too would be an admirable thing for the foreigner to inspect. Not that, for myself, I think I ever met a Protestant in France. One was either a Croyant or one was whatever the opposite word may be. One believed or one did not. And, oddly enough, not to be a Croyant did not seem to necessitate the same feeling as being an atheist at home. Once, for instance, I remember mentioning to an innkeeper that I was bound for Lourdes. And very much as I understand that

at home it would be possible for a family to say that although they themselves were Particular Baptists, they were always happy to welcome a Plymouth Brother, so to my ' Lourdes ' the French innkeeper countered with the astonishing remark that while he himself was not a Croyant, and so did not believe in Lourdes or God or the Pope, yet he was sufficiently broadminded to make no distinctions, and in fact employed an Italian youth who was a staunch Croyant of the most intense. And he actually called him from his duties and introduced us, one foreigner to another, one believer to another, whereupon the Italian boy grinningly produced a Rosary from his trousers and solemnly clanged it against mine, while the unbelieving master beamed with satisfaction at the success of the meeting. But of Protestants I never met any at all ; and, anyway, I had not got the time to go and look at their Temple. Even ' Flying Fox ' had to have a miss.

The truth is that I had something definitely to do in Saumur which was going to take about all the time I was likely to have. I had made up my mind about it the day before. There were two shrines in the town that I had to visit anyway, as part of the fixed orders, so to speak, under which I marched ; but I wanted more out of one of them —I did not know which yet—than any five minutes, and if I was to get on the road at all that day it looked as though I had better be hunting up my shrines. Saumur is not exactly a huge town, but as tram-cars were barred me and I did not know the way, there was not going to be too much time to spare. Little trains of steam tram-cars, police agents (there were some, then, after all) that did not seem to have made up their minds

whether they were on or off duty as they loafed outside the cafés, multitudinous soldiers in every conceivable type of funny uniform, the streets of Saumur seemed enticing indeed after all those miles of empty high roads. Then there were negroes that impressed me—simply because they were not behaving as negroes. I suppose they were colonial troops from the barracks, in the gorgeously coloured uniforms with which the wise Republic recruits them. But Saumur seemed to be taking them as a matter of course. They might have been all white for all the notice that was taken of them; or the French might have been all black. There seemed no 'colour line' at all. And the result was that the negroes were behaving neither as an inferior race nor as a superior; for they were everywhere—in the streets and at the little tables under the awnings outside the cafés, exactly as though they had been white men. But then everything seemed topsy-turvy. The cafés themselves seemed almost indecently democratic—rich men and labourer sitting side by side at the same little table, and neither of them seeming to mind. The system may have been good enough for foreigners, but it would never had done for a decent London suburb. In Hornsey, for instance, we each know our proper place and keep to it—or very soon are made to.

And while I was thinking over the absurdity of the continental ideas I turned a corner and came to the Church of Notre Dame de Nantilly. The guide-book has any amount about it. Pilgrimage shrine since the twelfth century, Margaret of Scotland had something to do with it, and Gylles de Tyr something else. There is one aisle about

which the editor is inclined to be a trifle doubtful, but the church taken as a whole he is able conscientiously to approve. There are some fine tapestries which every visitor will admire, and there is a baptistery which positively cannot be missed. And I did not see any of the things. On the other hand, I did see something which may have escaped even the guide-book editor on the latest of his doubtless frequent visits. We have the thing, of course, at home, only as a rule we say as little about it as possible. And the man who does it we generally say nothing about at all. But if he has to describe himself in the directory, he simply puts ' Undertaker ' and leaves it at that. But over here things are different, and it is not for nothing that his opposite number describes himself as ' Monsieur the Director of Funereal Pomps '. And here they were, those sad Pomps, in all their lugubrious glories, and I do not think I ever saw so many black cloths and silver hearts, yellow candles and black staves, crêpe and plumage. In other words I had dropped in at the moment of a first-class funeral. It hardly seemed the proper moment to pay my first call upon Our Lady of Nantilly, busied as she would no doubt be with the many prayers which must have been going up from the huge church. And, after all, my own rather selfish needs would be as nothing when compared to those of the poor soul that had departed. And so, after a bare few mintues, I got up again and stole quietly out. And first I had to find a café with a table where I could unfurl my map and take my bearings to start all over again, for the other church is right across the city.

In half an hour or so I found it. Along by the river bank and past the *quais* with their little knots

of loafers leaning over the parapet you go, and past the wharf where Protestant Saumur ships off barge-loads of rosaries and statues to every country in the Catholic world, and presently you come to a great shabby square, with untidy gravel where there should be fresh green turf, and huge trees turning brown in the drought, and dishevelled-looking little houses that look as though they had looked dishevelled for centuries. And in one corner of the square rises the great dome of Notre Dame des Ardilliers. Another famous place of pilgrimage this, Cardinal Richelieu helped to build it, and Madame de Montespan had raised a finger for it too. Courtiers and cardinals, it must have been a quarter of fashion three centuries ago. To-day it is mostly the poor who go there with their prayers. I saw them in little knots here and there in the great church. And presently, having said my standard prayers, so to speak, I came out with what I had really come for. One does not exactly put one's private orisons in the black and white of print, but there is no particular secret about the rough gist of the matter. It ran something like this: 'Great Lady des Ardilliers (if that is the way to pronounce it) you know exactly what I am trying to do, and why I want to do it. And that is nobody else's business. And you know too what a really dreadful mess I am making of it all, and that I cannot properly understand what anyone says, and that I did not know how hot it was going to be. And you know too that every day I am losing a few miles, and that unless something happens soon I shall be forced to give up. And then you know what they will feel about it at home. And that I promised faithfully that I would never ask anyone on the

road for a ride, but that I did not know then that in France they never offered one. And, please, please, if anyone by some miracle could only offer me a ride without my asking and I could somehow be put down ahead about fifteen miles (whatever that is in kilometres), I know that I should be quite all right again. And that I should get through to Lourdes after all. And is it possible that anything could be done about it, please ? '

It took a little time, of course, to put in order, and even then I was not at all sure that I had made a very good job of it. My Lord Richelieu, courtier as well as cardinal, would have thrown the little matter into proper shape in a minute ; and Madame de Montespan would scarcely have needed to bother. But, as it stood, I was ever so little afraid. It did not seem somehow the style of petition to which Our Lady des Ardilliers might be accustomed. And as I rose from the pavement I glanced up half doubtfully at the statue. But nothing at all had happened. And as I pulled aside the great leather curtain and passed out on to the dusty gravel in the glare outside nothing had happened there either. The sun was blazing as malignantly as ever in that fierce blue sky, and the road stretched as interminably as ever down into the unknown south. And with a sort of gasp I hitched up the disgusting old pack and made one more start. After all, the age of miracles was passed. Things like that do not happen to-day.

In case anyone wants to know, the road out of Saumur runs for miles by the side of the Loire. Great river as it looks on the school maps, in the record drought in which I saw it only the narrowest trickle creeps over the shallows in the middle, and the enormous railway bridge seems to span almost

miles of red-hot sands that border it. The sand somehow seemed to have crept over the banks, over the empty steam-tramway line, over a hedge, and on to the road itself. For mile after mile it ran, and never a soul in sight and never a vestige of shade. You go on like that for hours, and in the end you come to Fontevrault, and there, for a nice change, you can begin to climb. I remember the village particularly well. There is a castle there —one of the famous Châteaux of the Loire that we see advertised on railway posters at home. And hundreds of English and American tourists go there in motor-coaches to look at it. I suppose they see more of France in an hour than I should see in a month. I did not catch even a glimpse of the château, though I saw the notice-boards pointing to it and the guides hanging about ready to conduct people to the proper sights. But I remember the place so well because it was there that I ran into my first gendarme, and it surprised me a bit: not running into him, but that I had not run into one before; because all the way from St. Malo this was the very first time that I had been challenged. I had thought that France was a country simply overrun with police, all dashing about and demanding people's dossiers, and insisting on seeing their papers, and challenging the foreigner at every corner. And here I had walked getting on for two hundred miles and never a soul had taken the faintest notice of me. The very few police agents that I had seen in the townlets had never noticed me at all. I suppose I was not their particular business. And here was my first gendarme. Between St. Malo and here I might have stolen the blessed Republic for all any of their officials would have known. I was so

astonished about it that I could have written an indignant letter to the French *Times* if I had known its name. I bet that in free England, where we have no papers or dossiers, a foreign-looking tramp could not walk from Hornsey to Hatfield without coming under police notice.

I will say, however, that once the man did challenge me he did his job very thoroughly indeed. He was on a horse, which set him high above me. The real gendarmes, often on horseback, have nothing to do with the town *agents* that we English see in our occasional trips to seaside towns on 'the Continong', but are a sort of military police, something like the old Royal Irish Constabulary, and mostly spend their time patrolling the Grand Routes. At first glance he was going to pass me as an ordinary tourist to Fontevrault. Then, as he took in the details of the picture, he sharply wheeled his horse across the road and called to me: '*Qui êtes-vous?*' Later I got used to the challenge. He went on, '*Polonnais?*' When I said, '*Non, Anglais,*' he wanted to know all about it. Passport, and he checked the date of the landing stamp. Any other papers? Where did I stop last night? Name of hotel? Where going to? And it all went down in his notebook. There was not any hurrying either. He had a very big revolver in his holster. And finally, how much money had I about me? And then he had to be shown it. Same idea as our old fourpence on the Embankment business. With fourpence one was a gentleman studying life; without fourpence, the copper could take one for a homeless vagabond without visible means of subsistence—only it was ten francs in this case. I was glad that I had ten

francs. That suffices. And without a single superfluous word he handed me back my papers and, touching his horse, so departed.

As I hitched the old pack on and arranged myself I had a good look at the man's back as he slowly mounted a tiny hill, and I am bound to say that he cut a fine figure. As he sat his horse like a centaur, every strap polished up to its zenith and every bit of metal-work on his accoutrements fairly glittering with flame, I wondered how on earth it was done; for there, with the roads inches deep under its reddish dust, no Guardsman parading for Whitehall could have been finer. He was the first of his class that I saw, but later I was to learn that all gendarmes seemed taken out of the same immaculate box. Here and now I would honestly like to raise my hat to all of them. And they all too—all at least that I ever met—had precisely the same manner. '*Qui êtes-vous?*' Not a superfluous word about it. Quite how an English bobby strikes a foreign tramp I cannot say, but here at least there was no 'Sir'. Not a bit of the 'Yes, sir. Finest force in the world, sir. Every paper always says so. Thank you very much indeed, sir.' Instead the gendarme seemed to say, 'I am probably the best disliked man in my own country, and, for all I know, in other countries too. And a lot it worries me. I shall do my precise job, neither more nor less. *Qui êtes-vous?*'

The astonishing thing, though, was, on the whole, how very seldom I was challenged: about four times in six hundred miles. But after that first meeting I had an uncanny feeling that the gendarme was the unseen master every kilo of the way. Every little hotel, for instance, had its

register, and it was not, like in an English commercial hotel, about five years old, with obviously fictitious names and little jokes shoved in here and there. In fact, there was not any joke at all about the French register. It asked for about ten personal details, and you filled in every one. And the innkeeper watched to see that you did it. And across every few days of the book was scrawled the signature of the inspecting gendarme. So one guesses that the Republic, after all, keeps some check on its guests. But of actual visible control there was next to none that I could see.

There was one fact about its absence which worried me a bit. Towards the end of the trip I pointed it out to a Frenchman. 'I have,' I said, 'been challenged four times in six hundred miles. I think that at home in England I should have seen four hundred policemen.' 'And in Germany,' he answered, 'it would have been four thousand.' But my real point was that supposing anything had happened, how long would it have taken to have produced a policeman? Twenty miles either side of my route, an outrage, a child decoyed away, an old couple knocked on the head, and the shabby-looking foreign tramp would have automatically taken the criminal's place. And I am not sure that I could not have been lynched before any gendarme arrived. I thought the little point over several times.

Past Fontevrault and the road slowly mounts in a succession of gigantic switchback undulations. As far ahead as one can see it stretches to the point where the trees on either side seem almost to meet round the merest pin-prick of a sky-line. And in an hour, two hours, one is there. And then it is all to do again. And all the time there is nobody

and nothing ; until in the very end one comes on a spot where at last it is all fall and no rise. And there stretching into infinity is such a plain of sheer vast emptiness as the little English townsman is likely never to see in many lifetimes. Sixty miles can one see, or is it six hundred ? For there is no point on which the eye can catch to make a measure. No friendly spire with its village clustering round it, not even a curl of smoke wisping from a cottage chimney. It will be dark before one finds a bed. And then next morning it will be all to do all over again. And the five days' money is running out all the time.

It must have been somewhere on the road near Mirabeau that the thing happened. I remember the place quite well. The guide-book is quite worked up about it. Some king did something there in the Middle Ages. But what struck me was that it was there that I saw my very first ox-cart. It was a modest-looking ox, rather as if it was aware that it was a bit to the north of its real country, a single-harnessed beast dragging a cart that they might just have taken a horse out of, quite unlike the sixteen-oxen teams that I saw later in the real south straining ponderously at the burden of vast barrels mounted on wheels of steam-roller thickness. But such as he was, my one ox gave me quite a start, as a sort of harbinger of the ' might-be '. And a bit of a pain as well, for the ' might-be ' seemed at the moment a pretty shadowy prospect. The day was hotter even than Saumur, the road more endless. Neither map nor mile-stones showed the slightest prospect of anything ever turning up for hours ; and not a soul had passed me that day. And as I was trying to wring out the handkerchief that served me for

a sweat-rag it came. First a roar of seventy-miles an hour speed in the extreme distance behind me, and then, as I turned round to the portent, a whirring swirl of dust-storm rapidly approaching. Then, as the thing passed me, a jar of brakes and a face turning round to look at me, and then he stopped, and, opening the door of his car, made pleasant noises of invitation.

We could not understand each other, not properly ; but as the thing roared along, kilo after kilo of it, it appeared that there had been a something, a *je ne sai pas quoi*, about my back which was of the most Britannic. It was distinctive, one gathers well. And one well understands that his owner, the Grand Monsieur Johnson of Birmingham, would be desolated not to have offered the hospitality of his car to a fellow-Anglais making the tour of France. It was only of the most unfortunate that our journey together should be so short ; for here we must part. My road, there, to the right ; his to the left.

The thing of course was commonplace enough in all conscience. Even my French is sufficient to translate 'grand' as 'great', and to realize that Mr. Johnson of Birmingham must have been a wealthy Englishman who would probably have been glad enough for his chauffeur to have given me a stray lift if he had ever heard of me. But then, he never would have heard of me—in the ordinary way. Only as I tumbled out of that friendly car, a little dazed with my fortune, I glanced at the ordinary-looking kilo-stone that stood by the parting of the roads ; and it was numbered exactly twenty-four farther on from where that miraculous car had picked me up. Sitting down upon the sacred emblem I worked

it out. One multiplies by eight, does not one? No, divide by eight ; that's three. And multiply by five—fifteen. And, oddly enough, it had been exactly fifteen miles that I had asked for under the great dome of Notre Dame des Ardilliers back in Saumur. Mr. Johnson of Birmingham ; he sounded a little too English for a real Miracle, and as I trudged happily on I tried to re-christen him. There are some names which have always fascinated me, the Infant of Spain, Monsignor of France, the Grand Monarque. I had it. As the miracle of the Grand Mon Sieur, I felt Mr. Johnson to be meet company for even My Lord Cardinal de Richelieu.

After this I entered Poitiers with the air of a conqueror and with the best part of three shillings still in my pocket. The miracle had given it to me, and perhaps if I behaved myself other miracles would give me more. Anyway, for the present, all was well in this best of all possible worlds : money—there was some more waiting for me ; and a proper hotel, where, as a room had been booked for me in advance, they could not well reject me whatever they may have thought about my appearance ; and a parcel from home, with at least some of the clean clothes I wanted ; letters, and the Infant had somehow miraculously put on so many more ounces. And nothing to do for a whole day. Never was there a city in all the world so brilliant as Poitiers. And then there was a friend too, with the first genuine English voice that I had heard for years, it seemed.

I am afraid that on the whole I must have been a bit of a blow to my friend ; for I was not the same man that he had parted with only a fortnight before in England. Then I had been a little

middle-class Londoner, and I could have shown the decent interest of the educated suburbanite in all that Poitiers had to offer the tourist. Its Grand Square would have enchanted me, with its broad pavements covered with the little tables, and its officers from the garrison everywhere in their tight and spotless uniforms. There would have been a magic in the quaint cobbled lanes that mounted high to the Old Town as one looks down upon the roofs almost circled by the sunlit gleam of the little Clain. The names themselves would have had their romance—the Grand Séminaire, the Tomb of Ste. Radegunde (she gave her name to a disease, and *radegoundes* come in Chaucer or somebody). All the proper sights I should have visited, and every one of them would have opened a new world to me.

And now it was all changed. I had seen squares and cafés before, and French soldiers with their shuffling jog-trot, and streets and churches and little trams. And what did I want with Ste. Radegunde, when I had got my own special Notre Dame at Saumur, and when I knew now that I was going through with miraculous certainty to Lourdes itself? This was Poitiers, was it? Well, it might have been Madrid for all I cared or for all that I wanted of its tourists' stock sights. I was in France, it was true, but only because one has to be in France if one wants to walk to Lourdes. And let us be getting on with the job. A clean shirt again and a day's rest, but that's all there is in it. I am afraid that I had turned from a middle-class Londoner of decent middle age into something much nearer the primitive.

Certainly I did see the cathedral, and incidentally a private of infantry flirting outrageously with an

extremely pretty and expensive-looking young lady. But that was only because it happened to be Sunday, and one is bound to go to Mass somewhere. And I visited, too, Notre Dame la Grande, but only as one of the pilgrimage shrines of the route. And then, duty done, I went to the station; for from the hotel time-table I had worked out that at such and such an hour I ought to be able to see the passing of the Sud Express to the Spanish frontier. A dozen times from roadside railway-crossings barred by the curious striped poles that serve instead of decent gates I had watched French trains with their ridiculous carriages drawn by enormous black engines which seemed to hang all their machinery untidily outside instead of concealing it decorously in their innards; but I had never seen a really first-class express, and I wanted to. The thing was late; but as I waited in the little station yard and watched French family parties, baby and all, arrive to catch local trains for the nearest place of Sunday fishing, I did not grudge a minute of it. And when the great Sud Express did come, and I could glimpse it through the bars of the gates, it was worth the wait, with all its glory of gold-and-white international cars. But at forty-six it was a most childish thing to want to see, and I felt rather apologetic to my friend.

And at night there was a park with a sort of open-air music-hall at one end of it. Twopence it cost to stroll about in the incongruous crowd of sky-blue soldiers and respectable French fathers and mothers with their excessively respectable infants. Gilded gaiety and abandon there may have been, but if so it must have been in the fourpenny enclosure. In our part all was of the

most *gentil*, and indeed it was only with a little effort that one was able to see the young ladies as they succeeded one another in their little dances on the lighted stage over there under the trees where the band was playing. As one walked back to the hotel through the quiet of the centuries-old lanes, the rattling little tram-cars long since stopped, one felt gay indeed. But it was not so very late after all; for the Poitiers tram service stops at seven o'clock. French gaiety is not altogether so reckless as it sounds in Hornsey.

IV

THE rest day's interlude over, and Poitiers once passed, I seemed to have entered upon an entirely fresh phase of existence. All the way from the coast I had had the place at the back of my mind's eye. It would have been a sort of possible escape if the adventure had been overmuch. There would be my friend to meet there. I knew that I could rely upon him, and that if I had really wanted it he would in a minute have lent me my fare home again. And now there was not going to be any more Poitiers, there was not going to be any more English friend, there was not going to be any more English at all—there was not going, in fact, to be anything at all except Lourdes, hundreds of miles farther to the south. And, above all, there most certainly was not going to be any turning back. I had put the thing thoroughly out of my mind—just about Mirabeau, by the way. And as if my own private mind had needed the usual help to make it up, there had been another letter from my wife the morning

that I left Poitiers. It told me that it was warm in London, and that I was no doubt enjoying splendid weather in France, and after such introductory remarks passed on to really serious business. The Infant, she said, had gained still another ounce, and whatever happened I was to keep up the good work. At all costs I was to get through to Lourdes somehow, even if, as she added with wifely solicitude, I landed in the Miracle City with my feet worn down to stumps. In the face of such affection, then, there seemed no possible doubt about the business.

For the moment, at least, I had money enough. At Rocamadour there was to be some more—if it turned up—and parcels might or might not reach me. Somehow it did not seem to matter nearly as much as it had done before Poitiers. Then I was trying to be a little London gentleman who happened to be tramping through France. Now I really was tramping through France, and it did not seem really to matter in the least what anyone else thought about it. Not that there was anyone else to consider; for with my other respectabilities I threw overboard my introductions. At the very start I had had an introduction to every priest at every arranged stopping-place all along the road, and every priest had been written to about me. For the first few days I had called on them; but it had soon begun to drop, and I think Baugé had been the very last of them. What I had wanted, of course, had been for Monsieur le Curé to welcome me in the evening and to show me a decent inn in which to put up. But then I had never reached the village until too late to call on him, and when I had tried to see him a housekeeper had generally told me that

Monsieur le Curé was out. French priests must keep odd hours, to judge from some of their housekeepers, for as I had got shabbier and shabbier the story was always the same. 'Out; probably out all night. May not indeed be home to-morrow.' Indeed, as soon as the woman caught sight of my trousers it was safe to assume that his reverence would be permanently out during the whole of any stay that I might be making in his village. And even if I called upon him in the morning and did manage to get past his guardian dragon, there was little good to be had by it. I had by then had my night's lodging, and all that was left was a courteous word or so, translated with infinite difficulty, and my host's good wishes. And by then I had wasted half the precious morning's cool. There was another person that I was to call on—an English gentleman, domiciled in France, who was simply bursting with anxiety to meet me. And when I did find the man he was not English and he was not a gentleman. Yes, he guessed he had heard of Lourdes, and if I ever got there he reckoned, in a twang that could have been cut with a knife, there might be some old women to throw me pennies. What then did he take me for—a dancing bear? Something that the American armies had not troubled to take back to the States, he seemed to me, and I told him so. I also mentioned that if I ever heard again of his calling himself English I would come back and punch his head for him. And as he was about half my age and did not say anything, I do not think that he can have been a particularly brave American soldier. Perhaps it was wrong of me to have spoken as I did, but even the most pious of pilgrims may at times perhaps

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be pardoned a little irritability. On the whole, I did not grudge scrapping most of the machinery provided for me in the way of introductions.

Such niceties, then, jettisoned, I was able to turn my attention to really practical points. Was it better, for instance, to tramp in an absolutely filthy collar and tie, or to dispense with them and wear only a knotted handkerchief as a protection against the sun on one's neck? One fairly obvious answer of course should be to buy a clean collar, but the curious point was that no collar in all France seemed cut to my particular size; and, anyway, the things got dirty again in about a minute and a half. We returned then after an infinity of trials to my *questionnaire* in its original form. It is a little difficult of course to reduce the problems of pilgrimage to the precise tabular statements demanded by up-to-date transport, but after a little experiment I got the figures down to some such percentages as these:

	Pilgrim with Tie	Pilgrim without Tie
First rejections by public-houses ..	67 per cent	100 per cent

In other words, without a collar and tie of some sort nobody at all would even consider me. And I therefore tramped through the fair land of France in the battered colours of a north-country school that surely never since the days of its foundation by Archbishop Alcuin can have turned out a scholar so untrue to type.

Lhommaize, Lussac-les-Chateaux, Le Dorat, Bellac, Nieul—the days began to pass again with

almost monotonous regularity. I rose as soon after four in the morning as might be and breakfasted on whatever might come to hand. In that country and under those conditions the *café créme* and rolls of touristdom are conspicuous by their absence, and as often as not it would be the crusts of yesterday's bread eaten bread-and-milk fashion in a bowl of coffee. Even that takes a fire, and Madame la Patronne will not always be bothered to make one. In that event there is not any coffee at all, but wine instead. One dips one's bread into the stuff, and very nasty it is. And after breakfast, the march. A tramp of experience nowadays, I had at least the sense to inquire about to-morrow's road, and whether there would be trees on it or not. And as to the likelihood of finding an inn for a midday feed and rest. And then I was learning how to go into the place. It is not like England, with a crude commercial demand for drink and a fixed hour for the last farthing of legal profit, and the great iron gates clanging on the indignant crowd of disappointed customers. Over there it is all different. The place seems to open when it likes and to close when it wills, and to serve who it wishes and refuse whom it does not approve of. And as likely as not there is not anyone there indoors at all. Monsieur will be in his fields and Madame busied with her hens. Once I waited a half-hour alone in a perfectly good public-house to myself, and when Madame did come she did not like the look of me and ordered me out. Shades of Hornsey and the London Licensing Laws! One approaches them with a certain caution. Raising one's hat and bowing, one seeks permission to be seated. And then always as quickly as possible I would open

my pack, pull out the English guide-book, and ask Madame's kindness in pointing out our precise position on the map, thus giving her the opportunity of seeing the English on the printed page and at the same time tacitly reassuring her that I was not about to produce bootlaces or other merchandise. Sometimes, too, I would perform my famous cigarette trick. I think it is '*Cigarettes Françaises*' they call the things. But they cost a farthing or so more than the ordinary Maryland or Gauloises, and they are in a silver-paper packet that makes them a little distinctive from the cheaper yellows or blues. At all events, I always carried a packet, and then if the pack trick was not apparently functioning properly, I would take out a cigarette, light it, look at it with critical annoyance, and throw it away. The general effect was much as though some particularly disreputable tramp were to reject a Woodbine on the grounds that his medical man was confining him strictly to Egyptians.

Confidence thus established, one could get down to real business, when Madame, approving at last of her guest, would pull up the flap of a trap-door arrangement in the floor, and from a bucket of water underneath would produce the desired bottle. If it did take quarter of an hour's diplomacy to get a glass of beer, at least the stuff would be drinkable. But I cannot think that the system would be popular in England. Refreshment obtained, there were many *pourparlers* to be negotiated before leaving, and scores and scores of times I must have laid my entire packet of papers upon the table for the discussion of the ladies of the house. I was going to Lourdes, then? Well understood. *Mais pourquoi?* And then

we would get down to the question of the *enfante malade*. Had I then a photograph of the *enfante*? As a matter of fact, I had not. There had not been much of her to photograph. But in default I would produce the photo of my small stepson, and my pronunciation of genders being rather on the indefinite side, he generally served as well. Incidentally the photograph invariably sent my social status soaring sky-high. It might be an English caprice to walk through France looking like a tramp, but of a certainty a Monsieur with such a garden was a person at least of distinction. Home in England I had many times wondered what useful purpose the Crystal Palace might nowadays serve. Now at last my question was answered. For it was in the grounds that this particular snapshot had been taken. And so, the delicate business of the purchasing of a glass of beer safely accomplished, one would make one's *congés*, saluting, after the French fashion, by shaking hands with all one's hands at once.

A fair lot of the villages, of course, figure in the guide-book, with historical notes about their churches; but to me they all looked much of a muchness. And I think that I visited every one on my road that chanced to be open at the moment of my passing. Only between twelve and perhaps three they close for the midday siesta. As you push aside the heavy leather curtain that serves for door, the transition from the glare outside leaves one for the moment absolutely blind and, but for the little flickering corona of candle-lights in the distance, only conscious of the clinging scent of stale incense. And then as the eyes accustom themselves to the great cool dimness one picks up other things—the everlasting glow

of the little lamp before the Presence, the stacks of chairs piled against the walls, and the figures here and there of odd worshippers as they kneel on the bare stones of the empty nave. Always the same images they are kneeling before—St. Joan d'Arc, but a St. Joan so gloriously and colourfully militant as never to be seen in drab England, 'The Little Flower', and always Our Lady of Lourdes. I must have seen Her almost hundreds of times.

It sounds almost insanity of course to put it down in cold English, but whether it was physical over-fatigue or mental over-anxiety, the effect of a strange sun or the excitement of strange sights, I do not know. Pure imagination, possibly. But somehow as I struggled kilo after kilo and day after day farther south, those painted statues seemed somehow to be changing ever so little. In my middle-aged life I must, I suppose, have seen some thousands of them, and as far as I had ever noticed they all had looked the same. It is a little difficult to put down in type without apparent blasphemy, but if one may be forgiven for saying so, there is the fixed and almost over-gentle smile of patient motherhood. This is the Mother of Mercy, always ready to beg off the naughty and disobedient child from its punishment. So at least the smile had always struck me. But now the mouth was imperceptibly changing with every fresh church that I entered. Less and less was it belonging to an almost over-forgiving Mother of Mercy and more and more to the great Mother of God, immaculate and well-nigh terrible in great power. I turned it over in my mind hour after hour as I tramped those solitary roads. Had I any business to do this thing? If Lourdes was

not a miracle town, then why was I bound for there? But if it was—and of course it was—what then? And was it not a piece of most awful presumption for the like of me to dare to approach it? True, I had never made the faintest pretension to being any but the poorest of Catholics; true, I was only a sort of proxy pilgrim doing the actual walking part for my own wife; true, I was careful so far as I knew not to fall into actual sin. I said it over and over again. I was doing exactly what I had promised to do, calling at the shrines promised, saying the promised prayers. I argued it out with all the precision of counsel for the defence. But still the statues continued their stony gaze. Until in the end I had to put the opposition case. Was I making the faintest effort to treat the thing properly? Had I any business, for instance, in Poitiers to wander latish at night into that place with its 'Jazz-band Jo-Jo'? I had not said anything about that, had I? It had been after my friend had gone to bed. Certainly I had not known what it was, had only dropped in by accident, attracted by the sound of the music, and I had left after the briefest of stays. But, all the same, would the priest in my virtuous suburb have approved the place at all? Would my own wife have let me stop a single second in it? But I knew on the instant the answer to at least that question! Our Lady's servant! I wasn't a servant at all. The word implies service. Our Lady's vagabond might be better. They were calling me that in the Paris papers—'Le Vagabond de Notre Dame'. They meant my clothes and the way I was tramping. But I was thinking that it was my real self as well.

And so the lonely days dragged by. There were incidents, of course. The time, for instance, that the village inn would not have me at all. I had reached the place actually in the dark after a really painful day, and then, the second that I entered the door, Monsieur le Patron had me out again by the arm. Just like a Japanese tramp, a bit unshaven and with a very big stick, putting his head into a Buckinghamshire inn just at closing time. There did not seem any more to be said, or anyone to say it to ; because I could not see any more lights. So I just dossed down behind a hedge that was handy. It was not too bad for anyone as tired as I was, except that I woke up once or twice. First time positively startled me. It was a bit like being at a railway junction with all the lights, and I could not make out where I was. Till I remembered. And then it turned out that the lights were glow-worms. I never saw so many. The next time I woke up I did remember where I was ; and there suddenly came to me a bit out of my daughter's school geography when she was a little girl years ago—I could almost see the page : ' Wolves still exist in some parts of France, though in ever-decreasing numbers.' I wished the geography had been a bit more thorough and had said which parts. But of course it was all nonsense. The things do not come down to Central France in the middle of a midsummer heat-wave. And barring the drawback of waking up about two hours before I wanted to, and having to walk miles before I could find any breakfast, I was not a bit worse off for my night out.

In time I came to some trams running by the edge of the road. Not like the steam things I had seen often before, but electric concerns, and running

like young express trains. So I guessed I was getting near Limoges. The place, I heard later, comes in French slang, being in the war a sort of rest-camp for kicked-out generals, so that *Limogé* means just about what *Stellenbosched* did in our South Africa. But of course to us it is the place that we get our ' Limousine car ' from. At least, some people do. But I did not see much of the city. The cathedral, of course, but that was about all. When one is stopping as the guest of a school staff it is not etiquette to wander about over-much. Besides, I was glad to rest. The place I did not notice very much, but it seemed about the same as my own—endless rows of dormitories and miles of stone passages. Only of course, being a clerical school, there was an enormous crucifix or statue at every turning. At my old place, however, we should not have stood the star arrangement. I particularly noticed it: a star cut out in the frosted glass of every class-room door. Made of course for the eye of an usher to see through unseen. But, after all, it isn't for me to criticize other people's notions. What they did do better than at my old place thirty years ago was the teaching of modern languages—at least I suppose English counts as one. I know, because they trotted out all the boys that could be collected in holiday time, and gave them the unprecedented chance of airing their English on a real Englishman. And they all told me in very correct phraseology how much they did admire our grand English Shakespeare. Personally, I have never read a line of him, except the *Venus and Adonis*; and that must have been thirty-five years or so, when another prurient-minded little beast told me that there was something indecent in it. But of course

I did not tell the boys that, but left them with their impression that every Englishman spends his evenings proudly in the reading of our great national Shakespeare.

My only other observation of Limoges is that it was hot. Saumur had struck me as pretty fair in that line, but this place, with its portly business men walking about its streets carrying big umbrellas at ten o'clock in the morning, had it easily beaten. But when I mentioned the point they laughed and told me to wait till I got to Brive. And when I reached that place, by the way, they mentioned Tarbes, while at Tarbes they referred reverently to the heat of Spain. If one goes there, I suppose they say it is nothing to Africa. As a pilgrim I hardly care to discuss where the Africans must tell one to go. Meantime, Limoges was pretty near my limit, and I felt sorry for the generals that had been *limogé* there in the war.

Even by six o'clock in the morning when I was crossing the great bridge that carries the Route Nationale to the south of the city, it was getting hot. I had stopped for a minute, I remember, just past the *octroi* box, with its untidy-looking sentry sort of official collecting petty taxations from the country-folk as they straggled in with their market stuffs, and I was trying to pick out my correct route from a signpost where the road split into two. I could not quite read what it said, and turned aside to ask a man who was doing something to a motor-lorry just off the road. He could not understand me, so I wrote it down for him on the pad which nowadays always lived handy in my pocket. And then he pointed, and off I went. It was one more step to the south

and Lourdes. By the middle of the morning I had got, I suppose, twelve miles on my way and the heat was coming on badly. There were trees all the way, so there was no danger. But I was just considering how much farther I would go before knocking off for noontide when a lorry that was passing me suddenly pulled up, and its driver beckoned me. I was quite pleased about it. It was the man I had spoken to that morning, and he had remembered me and my pack, he said. They do not generally give lifts in France, but I was English, and that made a difference. Of course we did not talk at all easily. The man and his mate had no English at all, and my scraps of French were functioning even worse here than in the north. But sometimes I could make them understand if I wrote my observations down in big printing letters. It is a bit difficult in a jolting lorry, but it can be done. So as we rolled southwards through the Limousin country, every scrap of metal-work on the car so hot as actually to burn a hand that incautiously touched it, and the little cabin where we three sat only kept just barely bearable by the wind of a spinning-fan arrangement, we made conversation of a sort. I was going to Lourdes, was I? And they were most interested and even sympathetic about it. At every village where we pulled up—the lorry was delivering beer—one or other of them would escort me to the church door and practically push me inside. 'Ten minutes allowed for prayer', he would indicate by the holding up of the fingers of both hands. And if they had finished their business they would wait for me and I would find the beer-lorry snorting patiently outside the church door. And they wanted nothing for their

pains—not a copper, not a drink, not even a cigarette. The proper delivery of enormous casks of Limoges beer happened to be their job. Getting to Lourdes happened to be mine. As two French gentlemen, they were delighted that fortune had put it into their way to be able to assist an English gentleman. It was kind of them.

I do not think, either, that they were men of any very special piety. One of them at least I saw making what I suppose ought to be described as a gesture to a girl standing by a roadside cottage gate, and when I pointed reprovingly at the ring on his finger, which, according to custom, showed him to be a married man, he looked momentarily sheepish and then showed me what I had always suspected, that those enormous wedding rings that men wear are made sufficiently large to take off. So we rolled on the best part of the day, delivering here and picking up empties there; until, at the extreme limit of their beat, they parted with me at the door of a customer's house. And even then the good fellows completed their job by insisting upon Madame's acceptance of me as a guest. It took half an hour or so of gesticulatory argument before she was satisfied as to my bona-fides; but once she had agreed I am bound to say that she entertained me marvellously well.

Not easily shall I forget that friendly village. It stood, I suppose, at just about the edge of the great central plain of France, and the mountains that before I had seen only in the purple distance had now been by my motor-lorry lift miraculously moved up quite close. Their huge bulk stood sharply out only, so it seemed, a few short miles away, and through the windows of the little inn

the peaks of the Auvergnes towered clear-cut and distinct. One side indeed of the hamlet's one main street shelved steeply away down into a miniature precipice, and the cultivation of the public-house's garden was in a series of little Alpine terraces. The house, I suppose, would be impossible at home. No licensing bench would for an instant have passed its crazy architecture for the humblest roadside ale-house. Its simple system of sanitation, based as it was upon the presence of a miniature mountain-side and upon the elementary and convenient axiom of gravity, would have made an English surveyor tear his hair and die. Its single living-room had to serve at once as infant welfare centre, bar-parlour, family oratory, and chicken run. And with it all it had its guests. Besides myself there was a young Spanish artist there for the scenery, and an obvious honeymoon couple from Paris there for the air—and possibly quiet.

The Spaniard had a certain amount of English, the bridegroom a little Spanish. For myself, I had of course my French! It was an international assemblage of the most amiable. Madame la Patronne with a common sense that would have infuriated an English borough council was during the heat doing her cooking outside the place, having built a fire on the edge of the road. And from this improvised kitchen there streamed in to us, as we sat at a snowy-clothed table in one corner of the crowded room, a truly astonishing meal of five courses, with two sorts of wine and coffee and liqueurs to follow. And as she quickly passed without an effort, first here, then there, a drink to this corner of the room, another course for our table, back to her kitchen, we discussed

art, politics, the cuisine—everything. That duck, the bridegroom told me, was of last year's killing, being preserved according to local custom in its own grease. The fashion of cookery, he observed, as his bride left the table, erred if at all on the side of over-richness. It was too generous, it appeared, for all stomachs.

And after that gorgeous meal we had music, the artist producing a portable gramophone. Inside the room the customers clinked their glasses to its beat, while outside in the shabby little creeper-covered veranda half the village must have congregated to stare their fill at the foreigners. Through the opening of the window, unglassed for the heat-wave, one could just pick out the forms of couples circling to the music, dark shadows in the moonlight on the white dust of the road. And over in the distance it was still possible to trace the ghostly outlines of the mountains.

But with all the little gaiety, no 'Frenchness', the reader will be glad to hear. For by ten or a little later the last record had whirred to its finish, the last little glass clinked for the last time. They keep early hours in a France where the worker is up before dawn.

V

NEXT morning I was up myself and out, and swinging half-way down the long road that winds into the valley of the Corréze before the wraiths of heat-mist were well off the hills; and by the beginning of what we at home should call the morning I was entering Brive itself. As I

crossed its stone bridge, a cathedral-looking church tower in the distance, and the bustle of the booths of a market town just beginning, I might at first glance have been back in England. There were some great shapes on the steaming river that might have been the house-boats of a university city. But as one looked again they turned into the universal laundry-barges where the fair of France pound out the shirts of the brave. And that monkish-looking priest, bareheaded, bearded, and girt with a rosary about the size of a cycle chain, could scarcely have been found in Oxford. Into the town itself, and I was just dropping into the church when I ran into the priest, who had just finished his Mass. As he turned from his sacristy he stared hard at me, motioned me to follow him back, and then producing a newspaper ran through its pages until he came upon the paragraph he wanted. He pointed his finger at it, and looked at me accusingly. Was it, then, that it was I who was 'Le Vagabond'? I was, and then in the presbytery, just, as usual, next door to the church, we worked it all out with enormous difficulty of language and many appeals to the writing-pad. It was unbelievable, he said, that I could continue my journey through the heat. Why not, then, deposit my pack with him, stroll light to the grottos of St. Anthony which I was doubtless intending to visit, return to him for *déjeuner*, and so resume my march after *le chaleur* was passed? With a French gesture I turned my palms depreciatingly towards my trousers, but that mattered for nothing, he said. It was not every day that one was able to entertain a genuine vagabond. And he mentioned feelingly that it had been only last month that Monsieur

his *curé* had played host to a 'Mexican bishop' who had subsequently stolen his spoons. It was not, was it, that I claimed the priesthood? But no. It was impossible. I corresponded too perfectly with the description of the Vagabond as given in the paper. And I hastened to show my credentials.

A mile or so outside the town and one turns off the road to a sort of private drive that mounts sharply uphill through a kind of little park. Five minutes farther and the drive has become the steepest of paths, winding round a hill well-nigh white-hot under the scorching sun. And presently to the left one comes upon a series of little caves, their entrances masked by clinging creepers. Within, at the back, one hears the tinkle of a tiny waterfall as its purl breaks the dead silence. It was in one of these that St. Anthony of Padua lived for years and prayed and meditated. And as one mounts a little farther in the blinding light one comes upon a miniature plateau with a small chapel, and inside it there drowses an old priest, always waiting for any penitents that may seek his solace. Farther still and one begins a series of enormous and highly-coloured Stations, and at the very top of all things one comes to the gigantic Calvary which looks over league upon league of the valley below. To the right roll the Auvergnes, and below is the basin of Brive and the silver river. And there is not a thing to be heard in all the wide world. Only as, coming down again, one drops for an instant into the little chapel, there in the dusk of the corner is the faintest sound of hesitating whispers. The old priest has been needed.

By all the canons of the guide-book I ought to have been given truffles for lunch—for of Brive

it only says that the town is the centre of the truffle-growing world—but I did not get them.

Perhaps it was just as well, for when later on I did try in another town some of the *pâté de foie gras* which the editor so highly recommended to all travellers, I thought it filthy stuff. On the whole, I believe that his guide-book was entirely wasted upon me. He talks, for instance, about some famous cheese, and it tasted to me like pure chalk. He mentions *marc*, a sort of local liqueur made out of grape-skins, and it only made me feel rather sick. Hardly any of the delicacies of the country appealed to me. There is that southern trick of pounding up one's meat into a nasty-looking mess and then pouring red wine over it and drinking the lot. It makes strong men, they say. But I would rather remain weak. Half my life I had been looking upon a little French dinner in Soho as the rarest of treats, and now when I had got it I sent my wife an urgent post card that if ever I got home again I wanted kippers for breakfast.

It may be ungrateful to talk like that. The priest at Brive, I know, must have lavished his very best upon me: soup, and then cold veal, and then some vegetable stuff by itself, and then another course that looked like more veal; and then some of the famous cheese, and sponge-cake things that one dipped nonchalantly into one's wine and tried to suck with delicacy. But I was only so glad that his housekeeper had remained native; because once, out of compliment to me, some one put on *rosbif anglais*, and I wished more than ever that they had not. And after *déjeuner* we smoked and tried to talk. Was it always that they had so large a congregation as I had seen leaving after the ordinary week-day Mass? No.

But to-day, one gathers, was the market; and plenty of women between their bargains would make a little point of dropping into the church. It seemed a little odd after home, where we make a hearty Sunday meal of the business and then let it alone for the rest of the week. And so in that shady presbytery, with its pictures of the priest's mother and of two popes with their eternal smile, the early afternoon dragged slowly by. Till my host, glancing at the shadow on the washing hung in his little back garden, announced that the hour had come when man might walk with safety. As he weighed my pack in his hands he made our adieux. 'If,' said Monsieur l'Abbé le Vicaire (which meant that he was really only the curate, the *curé* being away), 'if it succeeds that you shall reach Lourdes, I think that you will have been the first of your countrymen for many ages who will have crossed France in just this manner. And I think, too, that you will be able to write a book of the utmost interest to your English.' As I bowed (always the safest thing to do when one cannot remember the French for the next word) I tried to throw into my gesture the faintest touch of self-depreciatory doubt. For what, I thought, can a mere curate in this back-of-beyond town know about it?

As a quarter of an hour later I was beginning to take the strain of the long hill that leads southward out of the town I was still thinking it over. And then began a duologue between the two selves which, according to the psychologists, are to be found in every man. 'Write!' said my subconscious. 'What in the world have you got to write about? Can you describe the beauty of the scenery like Mr. A——, or the beauty of your own

soul like Mr. B——?' And as I hung my head sheepishly, I had to admit the truth of the matter; for I do not generally notice scenery much, and I know very little about my own soul, and what I do know seems to me far from beautiful. 'And you have not the *flair*,' went on my subconscious relentlessly, 'like Miss C—— to write chattily and charmingly of sexual perversions. And since there can be no mysterious murder in your first chapter to be cleared up only in your last, it is painfully obvious that you are not another Mr. W——. I fail to see, then, that you have any claims at all upon the interest of the educated English reader. For what can you do?' As I thought over the indictment miserably, I seemed to fail at all points. And then, looking at the hill ahead of me, I answered the fellow: 'What I can do,' I said, 'is to go up that hill without stopping until I bust.' 'Mr. A——,' he sneeringly replied, 'or at least one of his secretaries, would at any rate have spelled the word properly. But go ahead.'

So I did. Only I did not know that the hill was going to be quite so long. In Limoges I had had my watch mended, so I am able to say that it took me exactly three hours and twenty-three minutes, and though I certainly went at a snail's crawl every now and then, I did manage to keep my word and never quite stop. To the side of me and below were some railway lines that twisted and turned in almost corkscrew spirals, and I seemed for part of the way almost to be racing a goods train with a monster engine that puffed tremendous snortings with its efforts to make the grade. And from some woods miles above me there was a flight of finches that seemed trying to

keep pace with me. But of humans there were none in all those hours. And then when the road did level out for the very last time and I was able conscientiously to stop, I just managed to get my pack-straps off and flop down anyhow. It must have been that time, I think, that I did something to a valve that a doctor later at Lourdes told me about, for it was half an hour or so before I got my breath properly back again. The grassy roadside where I lay was heaving up and down slowly, with the exact movement of the back of an enormous snake at the Zoo. Ever so gently. But as it moved, its colours scintillated into sight the one after another. There were a few wild flowers and some funny butterflies—much bigger than we have at home. One fellow hovering quite near me was all mother-of-pearl, and there was another that I saw all pink and green. And once a tiny lizard ran almost across my hand. There were some goldfinches hopping about me, and in a tree just above me another bird was making an odd buzzing noise. And when the road finally ceased to heave and I stood up and looked about me, it was worth the climb. For this time it was not any valley of the Corréze that lay below me, but the whole world. For hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles one seemed to be able to see, right across the central plain of France, right across all France towards the northwards. England itself, nearly a thousand miles away, seemed within the eye but for the heat-haze in the infinity of distance.

And now, feeling much better, I turned to look for the buzzing-noise bird in the tree above. I could not see him. I could not see a bird at all in the tree. So I began to throw stones into its

foliage; for I wanted the thing to come out so that I should know about it. But it did not. As I was throwing stones, a child appeared and stared wonderingly at the foreigner throwing at a bird that was not there; for it is not a bird at all, but a grasshopper thing that they call the cicada. Only when I saw the child it dawned on me that there would be a village there and probably a pub. And there was, twenty yards round the corner. I had not known about it. If that guide-book would talk a little less about *pâté de foie gras* and attend a little more to the things that matter it would be a better world. The village, when I did come to investigate it, was most interested in me. They had another foreigner there, it seemed, and they brought her out to introduce us. An Italian girl it was, doing some sort of labourer's work; and as she pointed at me and grinned and said 'Ingleesh' and I courteously replied with 'Macaroni', which is the only Italian word that I know, the French felt their alliance to be still functioning—so well, in fact, did we get on that I might easily have made that hamlet my halting-place for the night, only it was not much past seven even now, and another nine miles, now that I was refreshed, would take me on to Martel.

I remember the road because it was the loneliest that I had seen so far, as it ran for kilo after kilo on the high table-land that borders Corréze and Lot. There is a great big kilo-stone, far taller and fatter than the common run and lettered in red, that marks the departmental boundary, and as I passed it I seemed to have reached a country more remote than any I had traversed. They are not like English counties, but little kingdoms

of their own in their social geography. It was not one mere France that I was seeing, but a dozen little Frances, and I suppose that between Brittany and Bigorre lies a gulf as great as that between Sussex and, say, Scandinavia. Heaps of things were different, and they kept changing. I had thought, for instance, that all stoves would be those funny coffin-shaped objects that stick out into the room, like the ones we used to see in the war. But they were not. Down here one never saw one. The housewife would run out on to the road and take a little pile of twigs and in a minute have her fire. And there were lots of things like that. Belgium and the northern France of the war, I had thought it all about the same, and that French and Belgians were about the same people. But down here they were not. Because somewhere I met a Belgian, and, barring that he could speak French, he was about as much of a foreigner to the people as myself. Up north I had not noticed any difference to speak of between their fields and ours at home. I suppose they grew the same sort of things. But as one came southwards it had all changed. Huge chestnut forests there had been in the centre, and now it was all changing again, and there were trees that I had never seen before and crops I did not know the name of. They had tobacco in one part—miles and miles of it, I remember; which set me thinking how topsy-turvy things in France were compared to England. There was drink, for instance, to be bought almost anywhere and at any hour—of course providing that Madame liked the look of one—and yet tobacco and their infernal cigarettes were as closely preserved as though they had been cocaine. You could walk miles to buy a packet.

I did that night. Because for some reason I had only got one, and it was crumpled, and I was hoping at every corner to find a village or a shop where I could get some.

But there was not any shop or any village all the way to Martel. In fact, there was not anything at all. I could not even play my usual game that I was used, when I was bored, to play of annoying stray motor-cars. You do it this way. In France of course everything goes to the right. So you walk within a foot of an imaginary line drawn down the exact centre of the road. And presently, perhaps every hour or so, there comes a roar behind one. And then a violent hooting of the horn, and then a minute after, if one plays the game with nerve, another tooting and a violent grinding of brakes. And then I used to stretch out my left arm and beckon the car on with my hand, indicating that it had the right of passage and that I was not racing that day. But it had to pass me over there to the left of the road, '*Lá*'. I was most punctilious about my rights in that '*Lá*'. At home of course it would not be at all a safe game for a tramp to play, but over there it is all different. There is no speed limit, and the law in general allows a car to make its seventy miles an hour if it likes and can. On the other hand, if it does touch anything or anybody, even a tramp, it is automatically the car's fault, and its driver, instead of being allowed with his summons to pick his own fine and send the court a postal order for five shillings, is guillotined, sent to prison, mulcted of his car, and otherwise made to wish that he had not done it. But probably our speed limit system is the best. Only one dare not play that particular game in

England. Whether one dare play it even in France if there were women drivers I do not know. But I never once saw one. There were not many cars at all that I saw—not, at least, on those roads; not one in a hundred as compared to an English main road.

And on the road to Martel there were none at all. And of course no pedestrians. Not even another tramp. In fact all the six hundred miles I never saw another. For why should there be? As some one put it to me, 'In France is work for all. For any man even up to extremest old age, a little meat, a little bread, a little wine, and a roof—if he will work.' And come to think of it, there were not any workhouses either. It seems almost a pity that we English were so extraordinarily victorious in the war.

I was thinking all that over as I tramped along that evening. Somehow there did not seem so many birds as in England, for there was no chirping. And the silence somehow got a little on my nerves. It was a little as if I had wandered by mistake into a country that had gone to sleep. After the sultry furnace-heat of the Brive Valley, and perhaps the fatigue of the climb, it struck a trifle chill up here—on the very roof of the world so it seemed. And then I did come upon humanity once more. It must have been nine o'clock by then, and the work of a solitary farm finished till next dawning. And there they all were—the *cultivateur* and Madame his wife, and their sons and daughters, and perhaps a hired hand or two. And after their labours they were just sitting down to dine. There was one of those tin-roofed barn things without any sides, and they had put a trestle-table and some benches in it, and the

daughters were bringing the soup from the fire next to the roadside gate. That was just when I went in. First they had to hold back the dogs, and then, taking off my hat, I approached Madame and begged a glass of water. And of course they gave me Piquette instead, that second-hand sort of wine that they make by an extra pressing of the grape-skins after the real brew is over. Then they tried to get out of me who I was and all about me. But even when I wrote it down they could not understand my French, speaking only the *patois* themselves. So the farmer summed the whole situation neatly in one word: 'Vagabond!'. And it did not sound nearly as Bohemian and roguish as, say, in the delightful Gordon book about 'Two Vagabonds in Languedoc'. I had read it on purpose, thinking I was going to be one too. And now that I was, I did not like it. But perhaps the word has a different meaning in French. But as I raised my hat and turned for the gate I pointed down the road and asked '*A Lourdes?*' And Madame at the word got up and reached down a bottle of her real wine. And then they motioned me to sit down a minute. And I gave a franc to one of the children. And so left the best of friends.

Half an hour later I was in Martel, with its fortress-looking church standing up like a castle keep on the top of its hill. The inn was somehow built on the edge of the slope, with stables below and the humans a story higher up. There was a veranda balcony arrangement with creeping flower things hiding it like a curtain, and some one playing a sort of mandoline thing behind it, and all the family down to the baby sitting listening at little tables. As I peered nervously up the

outdoor stairway I wondered hungrily what sort of luck this time would bring me. Perhaps it was because it was dusk and they could not see me properly there behind the creepers, but I might have been a decently dressed English commercial strolling into an ordinary hotel and asking for a 'number'; for there was no question about my reception, and Madame almost before I had finished washing, had somehow cleared her balcony and had miraculously converted it into a dining-room, with the first course of a complete dinner actually smoking on the table.

By the time I had finished it the dusk had faded into dark, and as I sat and smoked at last I could hardly pick out the dark mass of a great hilly pasture just opposite me. There were some trees that shaded it from the moonlight, and some white flowers that grew on it in great bunches took on somehow the semblance of stars. The place was so steep. What they were I do not know. But from somewhere round the balcony came an intense scent. I think it would be of magnolias. But anyway it did not much matter. Only it really was the smell that all my life I had somehow associated with a south that never before had I seen.

VI

NEXT morning's wakening must have been one of my happiest in France, and before I had properly stretched myself it was all coming out in my mind. There would be Rocamadour that day for a certainty, and all that Rocamadour might stand for in the way of Infants at home. There was St. Joseph of Arimathea straight out

of the Bible, and Zaccheus and Veronica, and all that. The precise details may have been a bit muddled up in my mind, but I had looked them up once in an encyclopaedia at home. It had something, I know, to do with our own Glastonbury. I think St. Joseph had crossed France via Rocamadour to bring the Faith to England there. And it seemed to make it almost home-like. I had been to Glastonbury. Anyway, there was no earthly doubt about the supreme sanctity of Rocamadour. It had been a high place of pilgrimage for untold centuries, a sort of Lourdes itself for the Europe of the Middle Ages, and hundreds of miles away they had cut roads, levelled forests, built bridges that men might the better find their way to the far-famous shrine of Notre Dame de Rocamadour. Then Roland the Paladin had something to do with the place—I forgot quite what. Nowadays, I believed, the pilgrimage business was mostly over, and there was an English lady artist who had been doing sketches. Showing in London there had been an exhibition of her quaint old bits. I had read all about it. Most certainly I was anxious to get to Rocamadour. And just then something else came into my mind, and I almost tumbled out of bed with anxiety to be up and doing as a good pilgrim should. That when I had paid Madame's little reckoning this morning, there would be rather less than ten shillings left in the privy purse. Till I got to Rocamadour and more money. The very name began to sound quite musically to me.

And then as I was huddling on my clothes there came mixed up with the glorious jumble of St. Joseph and the rest of it still one more memory—

that at Rocamadour I had an introduction. There was a Frenchman there all agog to meet me and serve me. An extraordinary interest he was taking in my tramp, I had been told back in London, and now his anxiety was to be gratified. He should meet me. The very last of all my introductions, I would use him to the full. The others, it was true, had broken down badly, but he should make up for them. That good Frenchman, I was resolved, could write post cards ahead to every inn and hotel on the rest of my route to Lourdes. I wished I had thought of the idea sooner. I would have no more of this begging and praying at public-house doors for a meal or a bed. No more apologies to Monsieur le Patron : ' It is true, sir, that I have the air a trifle shabby, but if you could see me, sir, in my other chemise.' It sounded almost indecent. And besides, when I had got in and undone my pack and changed my shirt, Monsieur's manner generally indicated that he did not see much difference. There would be no more of that now. A post card ahead would do the trick. Mr. Rocamadour Frenchman could easily look up the addresses in a directory or something. I was glad it was all over at last. I had not liked the way that fellow last night had spat out his ' Vagabond ! '

While I was at it, in fact, I might as well get them to telephone to Rocamadour. Mrs. Frenchman might be grateful of some little warning of her guest-to-be. She probably had her preparations to make. I am a family man myself, and I understand these things. And there was a telephone in the inn. I had noticed it the night before. It is odd that they have a wire in nearly every place, and electric light everywhere, even in the

remotest hamlets, and yet that apparently you have to go to Paris to find a lavatory. But so it was. And after breakfast I began to tackle them on the matter of phoning. It took a long time. Madame was the only one who even pretended to understand what I said, and Madame was out. She would be back soon, I gathered. Her husband gave me up as hopeless, merely shrugging his shoulders impotently every time I said anything. Against this there was an old lady who was presumably the grandmother of the establishment and who talked too much, bursting into a positive flood of speech every time I looked at her. And the serving woman, 'La Petite' in every French inn by virtue of her office, and without respect to her age, stature, or condition of life, broke into a helpless giggle every time that she saw me. There was nothing for it, then, but to await the return of Madame.

It was lucky that the day was opening with mist, or the late start would have been almost fatal to me. In time Madame returned, and in less than a quarter of an hour had been made to understand what I wanted. A few words on the telephone and all, she told me, was arranged. The Monsieur at Rocamadour was overjoyed at my near approach. A hearty welcome was even then preparing for me. The world seemed singing as I clambered down the steps of that friendly balcony.

The true pilgrim, I suppose, ought to have something to say about Martel Church. It is a medieval fortification, and there is something peculiar about its architecture. But all I remember of it is that I had to walk twice round it to find the way in. Possibly that constitutes the

peculiarity. Anyway, the affair was over in minutes; and quarter of an hour later I was well out of Martel and on the twenty-mile road to Rocamadour. It is a pretty road as roads go, winding its way downwards in long spirals cut sheer from the edge of a forest-covered valley. Down and down one walks, satisfaction only chastened by reflection that presently it must go up and up. It is the Valley of the Dordogne, where richer folk pay a good deal to come by coach, and by and by one crosses a rickety suspension-bridge that shakes to every footstep, the river itself below. And then of course the road begins to go up, and goes on going up for hours.

It is a queer part of the world that one comes to, the 'Causse' they call it, a sort of limestone plateau that makes a world of its own. In the ages the rivers have tunnelled underground and run hundreds of feet below. There are some of them that they have wired for electric light, and tourists are taken down by guides and rowed in boats on the underground Styx.

And there are great caverns that run for miles, with odd stories about some of them. Here in the bad old days of persecution they had an underground church where a priest said the Mass to a congregation who formed a sort of secret colony of their own. And here was another cave where lived a whole robber tribe; and kept on living in their fortress for generation after generation, so strong was it, before they could bring sufficient force of soldiers to penetrate the network of galleries far underground. Tourists and scientists, climbers and antiquaries, they find the Causse a fruitful hunting-ground. But up here on the top is just nothing. All water sinks

through the ground, so nothing grows on the scraps of barren earth outcropped every few yards with bluish-black rock. And so there are next to no animals, and next to no people to tend them. It is a sort of wilderness all its own, the ' Causse ', and one understands how the few villages were *bastides*, or fortifications, each standing to itself as sentry against the surrounding desert. That accounted for my church of the morning, and for the name of another village that I came to later on. Labastide Murat was its name, because there was born that Murat who left the place to become a Napoleonic general and a king. And when one had seen the village one could scarcely blame the man.

And all the time that I was tramping the Causse it was getting hotter and hotter. The morning mists had long dispersed, and the sun seemed to have come out with stored-up vigour. The outcrop rock of which they had built the road seemed to have turned colour, almost as though it were glowing red-hot. The ferrule on my heavy English stick was hot enough to burn the hand. And long past noontide though it was, there was no halting, for with no tree and no habitation there was nowhere to halt. And of course there was nothing to eat. Why should there be with nobody to eat it ! I was almost ready to faint when in the early evening I did reach Rocamadour. I was glad to see the place.

I almost fell into it. It is a tremendous gorge, something like a miniature of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado as I have seen pictures of it. Up one cliff of it they have built about three churches (or is it five ?), with minor shrines, the one atop another, according to the piety of successive centuries. They are like swallows' nests, built partly

on to the sheer cliff and partly cut out of it. And then on the top of the whole pile there stands a kind of a castle, built to protect the pilgrims and the treasures of the shrines. Every crown in the Catholic world must have brought its offering, and even to-day the altars simply blaze with magnificence. Then at the bottom of the gorge runs a tiny river, and by its side a road that makes the single street of the village, with half its houses reached by long flights of stone steps, as though struggling to climb the cliff to the shrines above. And on the other side of the gorge—it seems only a biscuit throw away—is simply the sheer cliff of barren mountain-side. And that is Rocamadour.

At the first little café at which I called I inquired first for my host-to-be and then for the post office with my registered letter. The office, they said, was closed. It would be open, of course, on Monday, to-day being Saturday. The gentleman, they told me, did not live in Rocamadour at all, but about five miles away. Over there. Down those few million steps and then up those few million other steps, round the corner of that mountain and then over the Causse. I could hardly miss the place; though of course it might be that Monsieur would be away for the week-end when I did find his house. And while on the subject I may say that when later I did see Monsieur I only found a courteously bewildered Frenchman, a trifle puzzled as to what I might want. Yes, he did remember getting a post card about me some month or two ago, and that I was coming. I had come. *Bien!* And he hoped that I was enjoying France. Of course we do it at home, where some one tells some one else

that an American is coming along and can you be civil to him. Bound to have lots in common. And promising to tell the man the way to Trafalgar Square and even to the British Museum, one forgets all about him. I have done it myself. Only it is awkward when, instead, it is done to one. And of course Monsieur had had no telephone message about me.

The heat, the café gentleman went on, continued well. It was possible that I had noticed it. And the town was benefiting accordingly. It was full, he believed. No, he thought it unlikely that I should find a bed anywhere. Though, of course, it was possible. And thanking him for his helpful information I left the place thoughtfully. I hope that I threw into my carriage something of the manner of an Englishman taking his pleasures abroad. There were hotels, of course, each one up wearisome flights of steps. But—and apart from their being full up, what about paying for the bed? About seven bob for over the week-end. And my pack heavier than ever it had been. And my stomach certainly lighter. And as I passed through an archway so deep as to be an absolute tunnel and suddenly came out in the sort of Trafalgar Square of the ecclesiastical part of the town, a giant landing as it were cut half-way up the stairs that led from the street below to the castle above, I made up my mind. I had been so delighted that morning at the prospect of Monsieur of Rocamadour, and I had quite forgotten Mary of Rocamadour.

The square was crowded with tourists, being shepherded in approved style round the sights or wandering in little knots to the doors of the various churches, great pools of darkness against the light

outside. I could not look for anyone in particular, apply at any special door. There really was not time. That French breakfast was twelve hours old or so, and another five minutes would about see the end of me. Already I could feel my head swimming with the café-keeper's mixed red wine and *limonade*. The case was urgent. And pushing my entire bundle of papers, passport, introductions and all, into the hands of a white-trousered gentleman who seemed in charge of the showing-round business, I fairly threw my pack on the pavement and sat down upon it a trifle suddenly.

'*Ma Sœur*,' he called, and on the instant a Sister glided quietly up from a chair where, unnoticed by me, she had been sitting in a corner in the shade, and, touching me on the arm, motioned me to follow. Unlocking a little gate in an angle of the square she beckoned, and down some stairs, along a stone-cut passage, down more stairs and more passages we went, until in the end she came to the door of a little room, and there gravely inclining her head, she left me. There was a couch and blankets, water and a candle, a chair and a crucifix—everything that a tired man might need. The place might have been set out ready to wait my coming. And who am I to say that it had not been? And as my toilet made as best I could, I stumbled refreshed along that maze of passages and up the stairs to see what waited me outside the little gate, I found again the Sister. She was telling her beads with that absolute placidity of face which can only come with years of absolute placidity of soul. Servant of Mary of Rocamadour, for any work that was set her she was ready. Meantime she might sit in the kindly

shadow and say her Rosary. At my approach she rose, and again I followed her, down a great state stairway and under a great gateway, out of the church part altogether and down more steps into the village. And there, pointing at an hotel—a real hotel and not an *estaminet*—she bowed again and left me. The place looked too good to be true. It was miles better than my usual sort. And besides, my money. And then it came to me suddenly that I would better to doubt less and trust more. The most carefully planned human machinery for my comfort had broken down every single time. It might almost have been that it was deliberate. And yet there had been that business up at Saumur, and the exact fifteen miles that I had asked. Might not the most puissant Mary of Rocamadour, as powerful to-day as ever in any Middle Ages, have indicated precisely what she meant by her Sister's pointing finger? And into the place I marched as bold as brass.

And Monsieur the proprietor coming forward welcomed me in excellent English. No, he was a Frenchman, but he had been Officer de Liâison to the American Armies in France. All was most understandable. The church of course was putting me up as a pilgrim, but the Sister had thought that I might care to eat where they understood my tongue. It would arrange itself. The place was certainly full, but a table could be squeezed in for me just in the corner of the *terrasse* of his restaurant. And as I began to stutter out my condition, that truly admirable Mr. Interpreter set me at ease almost with a shrug. For money, that would be of the most correct. When one was introduced by the Church, it sufficed. On Monday we could discuss the little affair. Till

then it was of the most urgent that I should eat. And even as he was talking a little waitress in a uniform of brown and green was setting out my table with a pleasant sufficiency of cutlery and plates.

At the best restaurant in all the world one eats (and eats and eats and better eats) on a little terrace cut shelf-like half-way up the sheer precipice. With the decline in the sun's heat they had furled the awning, and by turning one's head one could see straight up to the castle place towering above, while the other way a biscuit tossed over the little parapet would have fallen in the village street below. To the right the sun was setting over the corner of a huge mass of rock, and ahead was an impression of sheer savage, barren wilderness. One might have been in an oasis of civilization, outpost against the desert. But where one sat all was of the most *gentil*, and the arrangements as the little waitress, prompted by the watching Monsieur, attended to my many wants were almost Parisian in their dainty thoroughness. Two and twopence it cost, by the way. For plutocrats there was a superior menu at three and fourpence, but as I read *escargots* on the card and seemed to remember that the word stood for snails, which I did not know how to eat, I decided that simplicity is the mark of the true pilgrim. Down below in the village an electric piano was tinkling somewhere in a café, and the last motor-coaches with their tourists were just starting off back to the world of cities. To the left the giant silence of the mass of churches and shrines stood up like a gaunt skeleton of another world.

By nine, when I staggered replete back to the

great gateway (for when one is a guest of Holy Church early hours are *comme il faut*), I might have been entering another age. Gone was the very last tourist, and the square was deserted but for a janitor and his clanking keys. As I stood for a minute while the great doors clanged to and a portcullis sort of thing slid down, cutting me off irrevocably from the outside world, there came into my head a scene from the *Yeoman of the Guard* that I must have watched in childhood. The great courtyard in the moonlight had been exactly the same. And this was, of course, in its way another Tower of London. When still a minute later *Ma Sœur* appeared to lock me behind my little gate, and I slowly fumbled my way down those steps and passages to my little chamber deep down in the very bowels of the rock the impression strengthened. Never had I known a silence so deep ; I might, I thought for an instant, have been buried alive. And then as I peered out of the little deep-cut window, and heard a great bell clang out from somewhere overhead, I saw that I was not buried. This place was not dead at all, but very much alive. It had a life of its own, cut off from the life of all the world outside.

From the village below the hum of talk came up faintly like a mere twitter. They were doing something down there, I could see. A sort of procession seemed marshalling. And then it started : all girls, as far as I could pick them out under a lighted café window, and each one holding a candle. And they were singing, but up in my keep I could not catch the tune. Slowly the double crocodile passed out of sight round an alley corner, but five minutes later had reappeared and was climbing a path on the mountain-side

opposite. As it would pass a patch of moonlight I could see the girls, and then as it would traverse the shadow of a jutting corner of the cliff only their candles, burning flickerless in the still night, would be visible. For half an hour I must have sat at that window watching, and then the procession turned on itself, marching down the hill and back to the village. This time I could pick out the sound clearer, echoed against the face of the rock. And it was the Indian love-song from *Rose Marie*. But why that song, or what it meant, I did not know. And while I was trying to puzzle it all out I fell asleep.

Wakening came to the clang of a monster bell, and I was up in a minute. To be late would be unpardonable. But when I got upstairs and into the church I could not make out what was happening. This was no service that I knew. It seemed a perambulatory sort of worship that was going on, with the priests saying a bit here in one church and then processioning off downstairs to a crypt church below, with all the people following them. And then up again to yet another shrine. And I could not follow even a word of their Latin. They were pronouncing it all differently from at home. So, to be on the safe side, I went again after breakfast. Laval and Poitiers had been cathedrals and so perhaps had not counted, and this was my first Sunday at Mass in a church of the real France. It was all so different. No ordered rows of seats with a congregation rising and standing or kneeling like one man. Here if you wanted a seat you fetched a chair for yourself from the pile stacked by the walls, and later an old lady would call on you and collect some fraction of a farthing for rent of it. But half the people

had no chairs at all, but knelt all the time on the bare stones. And not in rows, but just anywhere. And they knelt properly. No leaning forward as little as might be and confiding to their hats the misery of their sins, but kneeling bolt upright as uncomfortably as possible. And lots of them were praying with their arms stretched straight out at length. Moses did it in the Old Testament. I tried it myself, and extraordinarily tiring it is. But they seemed to take being tired as part of their worship. One could scarcely imagine a bazaar to raise funds for fresh cushions being successful at Rocamadour.

One ought not, of course, to allow attention to wander in the sermon, but I could not understand a solitary word of what the priest in the red cassock was saying, and frankly I was looking round the place. Up on some beams near the dark, wooden roof are a lot of shields and swords and things. They were left by the great people of other days who had come a-pilgriming to the shrine. Some of the inscriptions I could read: Duke Baldwin of this and Count Raymond of that. And suddenly I caught a Count of Boulogne. It was an incongruous thought in that place, and probably wicked and irreverent, but just before I had left home there had been a wretched young man who had stolen a foolish old woman's money by telling her all about his aristocratic ancestry and his family jewels and so forth. He had got time for it, and the case had been in all the papers. There in the church of Rocamadour I could almost see the headlines in the *Daily Express*. And the point was that he had called himself Count of Boulogne, and the prosecuting barrister had said that there was no such title. And here it was.

It was probably a punishment for not at least trying to attend to the sermon, but as I turned my head back from the roof I saw that several people were staring hard at me. And then I realized what an awful thing was happening. I could now catch words that the red-cassocked priest was saying, 'Laval', 'Solesmes', 'Poitiers'; it was a whole string of the places that I had been through. There could be little doubt about it. That priest was using me as an example. Here is an Englishman who cannot speak French, and he has actually walked through our France to Our Lady's shrine. In a Catholic church one does not interrupt a priest, but I was within an ace of starting up and trying to tell that priest what a dreadful mistake it all was. That I was not a pious pilgrim at all, that I had probably done things much worse than anyone in his church, that I was the last man in all the world who ought to be held up as an example of the good Catholic. But I could not of course, and I had to sit still. And presently the sermon came to its end and they went on with the Mass. And I did not let my attention wander any more.

When it was over there were a few sentences of what seemed to be local invocations. I once heard a proclamation by the heralds outside the Mansion House in London, and this sounded very much the same: as though the priests were making a sort of challenge to all Christendom. 'Room for the Very High and Puissant Lady, Notre Dame de Rocamadour,' it seemed to ring. The chant was repeated several times, and I could catch the Rocamadour part perfectly.

After *déjeuner* I just did nothing. But as I loafed round the place I could see what it was—

a sort of French Matlock for the scenery, with a touch perhaps of Glastonbury with its gigantic ruins of a faith of other days. Except that while Glastonbury was dead, this place was very much alive. There were the little cafés and the picture post card shops and the places where they sold souvenirs, each crowded to the doors with day-trippers. And all the hotels were full, and everybody was sight-seeing. Only all the churches were packed too at the services, which they would not have been in Glastonbury. Every candle-stand was ablaze with candles. At every hour there were people kneeling all over the place. Outside through the tunnel and up the mountain-side there are some giant stations of the cross, each one set in a cavern carved out of the cliff. The path must have been half a mile long and of extraordinary steepness, but there were any amount of those day-trippers doing the business under the grilling sun. And this was just an ordinary week-end. When the great annual pilgrimage dates came round there would be thousands of people instead of scores. There was even a hostel for the pilgrims kept by the Sisters—not the place that I was in, but a regular barracks at the top of the cliff where they could be housed wholesale. Mary of Rocamadour was not dead at all. She was living. It was not a Glastonbury.

As I left next morning I got Mr. Interpreter to come up with me and make my compliments to *Ma Sœur*. No, she said, there was nothing to pay. If one had nothing, Mary of Rocamadour was rich enough to care for her children. If one had a little, perhaps sixpence a night would not be amiss. A little more, and give what you will for the box. And as I handed over my little packet

of small French notes, retrieved now from the post office, she did not even deign a glance of human curiosity at it, but threw it unopened into the slit. It had gone for Mary's poor. As I turned to go My Sister gave the faintest, palest echo of what might once have been the ghost of a smile. 'I think,' she said through Monsieur the café-keeper, 'that you are the first of your race for many lifetimes to visit Our Lady of Rocamadour. But we hope that you will not be the last.' Half an hour later, as I climbed the path on the other side of the gorge, I stared across at the great Gibraltar-like pile, trying to pick out my own particular window. It may have been fancy, but I thought that inside one casement I could see the white of such a coif as a Sister would wear. They would be making ready the place for the next wanderer.

VII

AS one journeys southward the road runs for miles over that infernal Causse, and once at least I made sure that sunstroke was all but on me. The thing positively hit down at me. The flaming sword was here no flight of imagery, but an actual and dangerous truth. I remember the pains I was at to make for the nearest scrap of cover as fast as ever I could, and yet without the actual run which would have given the enemy his chance. It is an evolution much harder to perform than it sounds, when all the time one is expecting a crash on the back of the neck. Nearly all that day I was thinking about Rocamadour and the miracle of the interpreter. For who would

have expected to find such a man in such a place ? And I began to remember other odd things that had happened to me. There had been that time somewhere near the start and before I had got used to things when the loneliness of the business had suddenly occurred to me, and the feeling had hit almost as hard as the sun. Day after day with not a soul to speak to except people who could not really understand me and whom I could not really understand. It had struck me then how much I would give to hear an English voice again. I had almost prayed for it. And then, five minutes later, I had turned into a stray roadside inn : just the ordinary place, a cottage kitchen with a few bottles and a crucifix over the place that acted for the improvised bar, and chickens and babies running all over the place, and Madame getting on with her work bare-legged. The son of the house had come in while I was there, a flannel-trousered dandy and the obvious apple of *Maman's* eye, and a couple of friends with him. When they found me they had tried to talk. An elaborate, long-distance wireless, it seemed, was the joy of the son's heart and they switched the thing on out of compliment to me. Bordeaux came first, and then the friends obviously told the lad to twiddle the gadget round Europe and see what happened. We squeaked and grunted at one station after another, and then we found London at the identical instant that the clear-cut voice, with its I-will-now-Tell-the-World-that-I-was-at-Oxford accent, of the gentleman from Savoy Hill was announcing that 'We are about to listen to an organ recital from St. Michael's, Cornhill.' So it made me feel less lonely, and incidentally it reminded me of that huge statue of St. Michael, patron of pilgrims and

strangers in foreign lands, back in the little church at Mont St. Michel. But it was a funny coincidence there in that place.

Then there had been the time that I had almost come down to praying for food. It was a biggish café place, but not the sort with waiters and little tables. More like a workmen's eating-house in the Waterloo Road, with long tables covered with rather dirty oilcloth and men in their shirt-sleeves eating messy-looking foods from greasy-looking plates. But not quite the same, because plenty of them were only drinking. There was a bar place at the back, and a girl with her sleeves rolled up racing backwards and forwards with a tray. She would not take any notice of me. Nobody would. It was not their way to throw me out, but they were not going to serve me. I was about as popular as a Japanese tramp would be in an English coffee-shop. Even my money was not any use. Obviously I might have stolen it. Three times I had been up to the bar and had waved a note at Madame and a bit of paper on which I had carefully written out what I wanted to say. And each time she had busied herself at the other end of the counter. I was getting tired of it, for I was famishing. But there had been nowhere else to go. One cannot exactly go down on one's knees on the dirty floor, but I had picked up a filthy newspaper and, pretending to read it, had held it in front of my face for a minute ; and as I had put it down rather hopelessly, a woman's voice had suddenly said in my ear, ' Say, boss, what is it you want then ? ' It was very surprising.

The lady had been sitting there about an hour drinking something out of a little glass and had taken no notice of me before. I had not had an

idea that there was a customer there with any English at all. It was not much English, when I did get it, but it was enough. For she went on to talk to Madame, and within a minute we were all the best of friends and I had got my food. Now, had that been a miracle ?

If it had, then miracles work in funny ways. The lady was a little vague as to how she came by her English. There was something about an American soldier, and being friends with him in Paris just after the Armistice. We did not, of course, go into any Ciceronian disquisition upon the Nature of Friendship, nor was the English thus acquired of any especially classical brand. ' Guess one cocktail more,' and ' Boss, give to it a name,' sentences like that mostly wholly unsuitable for a really serious pilgrim they were, but the poor bit of English, such as it was and how acquired, worked literal miracles as far as my wants were concerned. And as we parted the lady addressed me thus, ' Boss, you are marching to Lourdes. Me, I have not been to any church for many years. But I know well Lourdes and what it means. And if you get there, you must remember me and pray well for me to the Holy Virgin.' Thinking it over, I was not at all sure that two miracles had not happened.

It was on the second day out of Rocamadour that I began to find any shade at all. That was on the road that winds downwards from the level of the Causse to the valley of the Lot. I was in Quercy now, if one is to count those old pre-Revolution provinces that now are superseded by the modern departments. Quercy, I remembered from some book, was the part where the girls used to clip off their hair and attend a regular market to

sell it to dealers, who sent it all over the world. The bobbing and shingling business had ruined their market, but now the trade was brisk again. Long hair, somebody told me, was coming into fashion all over France, and as the Paris ladies could not grow it quickly enough, the Quercy girls were supplementing it for them. I was glad to know that bit of news. It is rather a compliment to be treated as a person interested in fashion when one is walking about France with one's trousers in the condition of those of the traditional gentleman who failed to clear his trumps.

What, however, struck me personally about Quercy was that it was about the first time I had really met the *patois*. An awkward meeting it was. I had always thought that it was merely a dialect of French, something like broad Yorkshire as compared to London talk. But this was not the same thing at all. It was a separate language of its own. I saw some of it written on a picture post card, and it seemed more like Spanish than French. And the trouble about it was that most of the people I met on the road spoke it, and could not make out my French even when I wrote it down for them. It was through that I actually got lost that day. I had asked the road to Cahors. It sounds surely simple enough, but I suppose even the couple of words went wrong somehow in the pronunciation. Anyway, the man had pointed me a road, and when I took it I found after an hour or so that it just led nowhere in particular, tailing away on a mountain-side miles from anywhere. So I had to come back again and start all fresh. How the real pilgrim managed in the Middle Ages in foreign countries I do not know, unless they had all got a *lingua franca*. I thought in these days

Latin might do instead, but even that did not function properly. I tried it once on a priest, inquiring for a *bonum hospitium*, which I thought ought to be about right for a ' good public-house ', and he did not understand what I wanted. We pronounce it all differently somehow. Considering that my school spent about ten years in teaching me Latin to the absolute exclusion of everything else, it seemed a bit hard thirty years later to find that it had given me a pronunciation which nobody else in the world could understand.

Anyway, the language difficulty that day made me awfully behind-hand, and I was ever so pleased when in the end I did strike a small inn only a few miles out of Cahors. It was a bit of luck that I saw it at all, right away from the road and through a garden which led down to a little river. When I went, there was only a Monsieur le Patron at home, but after due inspection and cross-examination he pronounced himself willing to cook a meal for me ; and immediately went and caught some crayfish from the stream. But in a few minutes there dropped in a whole French family. Heaven knows where they came from, but they seemed to be regular customers. And after my lunch I talked to the father for an hour, till the worst of the heat had passed, about which of our countries had suffered the worst in the war. It was his having a pretty obvious deformity that started it. A war wound ? Yes. I am a life-pensioner myself. Not much of a pensioner. Eight shillings a week. But then there is not very much the matter with me. But then this fellow with something really bad was getting far more like eight shillings a quarter out of his Government. He thought that we had done very

well out of the war. It was rather difficult to argue at the rate of about a sentence a minute, but I could not help remembering a place in Kingsway in London. The base is one of the headquarters of Woolworth's, the excellent American sixpenny stores, and above that is the 'special branch' of the income tax people, where the official arranges for the selling up of the triumphant Briton. And they call the lot 'Victory House'. It always seemed to me a bit symbolical. But my French was not good enough to tell him all that.

An odd thing about that pub was that when I came to leave and was looking round to settle up for my lunch there was nobody to pay my money to. Monsieur le Patron, the French lady told me, would be asleep. This was his hour for siesta. What had I had? She thought then perhaps a shilling, and did I think that reasonable? Then if I gave it to her everything would be all right. And I am sure it would be. But home in Hornsey nobody ever asks a customer to take charge of a public-house for an hour or two; and it struck me how very honest France seemed—not only in that case, which may have been nothing, but in plenty more ways. Several times I saw a motor-car drawn up empty by the side of a country road. Its occupants would be fishing or bathing somewhere about, but there they had left their car with apparently all their rugs and things in it. They would be lucky, I think, if they found it again on, say, our Hatfield Road or even in our suburb itself. What are you to think of a country where the very police knock off work in the evening!

Cahors, when I struck it two or three hours later, was an exact example of the idea. Apparently not a policeman on duty in the whole city; and

as far as appearance went I was miles and away worse off than when I had hit Saumur up in the north. Six separate inns I think I tried, and not one of them would even look at me. The cool of the evening had come and the town was taking the air, dragging out their tables and chairs on to the pavement. There seemed a place for everybody except me. I was just about to turn and hunt for the *mairie*, where at least there is supposed to be an official who can do something, when, crossing the big square near the cathedral, I saw a large and dignified-looking priest. I was walking to Lourdes, I had a pocketful of introductions. Surely this was the very man to help me. I hardly thought that he would ask me to dinner, but at least he would do something. And he did. For as I stepped up, pack on back and hat courteously held in hand, he waved benignantly at me and solemnly presented me with a fifty-centime piece. I see now that it is unfair to laugh, let alone to be as angry as I was at the time. And besides, when by in turn offering him an odd English penny which happened to be in my pocket I did make him look at my papers, he was most apologetic; and more than that, showed me the way to what he called an hotel for *petits ouvriers*. A kind of coffee-shop with a few rooms over it would be about our equivalent, I suppose. Anyway, the place did me admirably.

I think the town intrigued me more than any place I ever have seen. According to the guide-book it is split into two parts by the Boulevard something. On one side lies the new town, with its school and hospital and hotels and all the rest of it. On the other side is the old part with its 'Quaint alleys and houses'. It was of course in

the 'Quaint' part that I was stopping, and it seems to me an extraordinarily tactful way of describing the drainage. I had never properly understood before quite what the quaint old-world cry of '*Gardez l'eau*' might mean in all its thoroughness. But I would not have missed my quarters for the world. Just why the place interested me is rather difficult to tell people. But all my life, ever since I can remember anything at all, I have been having a rather special dream all my own. It might come once a month or once a week, or sometimes for a whole succession of nights, but it always comes and it is always the same. There is a kind of café place (and I first dreamed of it years before I ever heard of a café) with a veranda and people sitting in the shade at little tables. And opposite the café is a great church door. It is very deep, and rounded into a perfect arch. It is dark inside, but you can just see a little circle of candle-lights. And there is a cloud of incense rolling from the dark church into the blazing sunshine outside. I once told a doctor about this dream, one of the new sort of psychological doctors, and he explained it all away in an instant. Something to do with the eternal struggle between Lust and Conscience, he said. But I did not quite believe him. I came from ordinary Lincolnshire, but my mother was a Latin. An Italian governess she had been. And I wondered if that had anything to do with it. My doctor friend then called it 'Prenatal Influence', only that did not seem to help much either. Anyway, the point was that here was the very church arch as I had seen it hundreds of times. And the café of the dream was very much like the place I was actually sitting outside. Then in the dream there had always been a tune. I

do not know enough about music to describe it, but something like a tango, only with even much more of the monotone in its beats. There was once a play in London, the *Emperor Jones*, where they beat a tom-tom. I went to see it fourteen times, till my family got a little peeved about it. But that was the real reason: because the tom-tom was almost precisely the dream music. I told the doctor that too, and he said it would be my own heart-beats. I do not know, but here in Cahors I had almost got the thing.

As dusk came on the customers of that hotel place brought chairs and tables outside. No waiters. We did it ourselves. And there we sat at the corner of a square with the lights and bustle of the place behind us, and that great dark mouth of a cathedral door just opposite. And one of the men, a big fellow with his shirt-sleeves drawn up over his great hairy arms, produced a guitar sort of thing and played what was very nearly my tune. And I do not think I was ever so happy in my life before. I stopped a whole extra day there just on purpose, which is obviously a ridiculous thing for a middle-class man of forty-six to do.

While I was in the place I did see something of the town. Not in the daytime, of course, because it was too hot to go out and I slept most of the time. Every time I did go downstairs to the café part there was a dear old gentleman waiting to try to talk to me. Quite who he was I never could make out, but in the war he must have been some sort of hanger-on near a British camp—perhaps a French 'Territorial' guarding a crossing, or canteen man at a French mission. I am going by his obvious age. But whatever the job had been he had been in touch with our men and

had 'learned our language', and he was intensely proud of it. Think of all the indecent words that were floating about in the army, and you have the old man's boasted English. What he worked at in Cahors I do not know, but the scene of his labours must have been uncommonly near to that hotel. And every time during the day that he dropped in for a *chopin*, which is that sort of French for the more refined English 'quick one', he would anxiously inquire for his ancient *camarade* of the war. Which was me. Generally he had remembered another little indecency which he wanted to repeat to me before he forgot the word. As a real pilgrim I know I ought to have told him coldly that We were Not Amused. But somehow it struck me as funny. And pathetic at the same time; for the old boy really did not know what half his treasured words meant.

Then, of course, there was the cathedral to visit. That was handy and one need not be afraid of the heat. Only just across the road. One goes down steps into the place instead of up them, so that the cool dimness is all the more intensified. There are some odd-shaped domes to it, which from inside give it an unusual aspect, with its huge central floor and worshippers kneeling all over it facing the side chapel of Our Lady. There is something curious, too, about the See. The bishop, I think, had the right to have his full armour, sword, spurs, and all by the side of the altar as symbol of his temporal power as baron. But I am not sure of the details. But anyway, it isn't a bit like any cathedral that I ever saw at home.

In the cool of the evening some one from the hotel took me to see the famous bridge. I think the Romans built it, and Cahors is proud of the

thing. Where everything else in the city is, as usual, electric lighted, it is gas just on the bridge. I particularly noticed the point, and I suppose it is to give a softer light. Imagine a hard-headed English municipality going to that trouble. For the matter of that, just imagine an ordinary customer at an ordinary English coffee-shop giving up an hour of his evening to taking a foreigner round to look at some antiquity in the town. It was not that he wanted anything out of me, but just that he lived in Cahors and was proud of his town and wanted the stranger to see its best. So I did. But if you wish to know anything about the bridge itself, its architecture, or the date it was built, you will have to look in the guide-book.

To get to the place you cross another bridge and then follow the outside bank of the River Lot as it encircles the city peninsula-wise. In the evening cool there will be hundreds fishing from the banks, but oddly enough not a soul boating. I do not know why, but all through France I never saw a single sculling pleasure-boat. On the other hand, everybody with an hour to spare seemed to put in the time in fishing. Magnificent fish lots of them were too. Big trout that at home one would have to pay a small fortune for in the leasing of 'rights'. But over here anyone seemed to go for them about as easily as small boys in London after tiddlers. So we came to the famous bridge, and though I did not understand it I could see that it was worth the walk, all battlemented and portcullised and with the proper offices and annexes for the pouring of boiling oil down the necks of any invaders. My Lord the Bishop would presumably don his spurs and armour on such an occasion to whoop up the defending side.

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As we turned into the little hotel my new friend asked at what time I should be leaving in the morning. And I told him as soon after four as might be. 'You are,' we worked out with paper and pencil, 'a very ignorant man. I did not think that in all France was a man so foolish. Listen. You do not know to-morrow's road or that it has no shadow. And by nine you will have reached nowhere and the sun will make you very ill. Be advised, and leave at two o'clock.' So I asked how on earth I was expected to wake at two and how I should get out of the hotel at that hour, and he went on: 'You know nothing at all. Not even that the next man to you is a baker, and that if you pay for a *chopin* for him he will call you. And for the hotel, pay them to-night. There is a little door by the side which is never shut but is open all the night.' Another instance of honest France!

VIII

THREE o'clock next morning found me striding along southwards in the dark. My friend had shown me the road out of the city the night before, and I could just pick it out in the cool dimness. I was going magnificently, I thought, and why on earth had I not done this before and saved myself many pains? And just then I got my answer in the snarl of a farm-dog that had come silently across the road and all but got me. I had had trouble with dogs before, any amount of times, but in daylight there had always been a some one in the nick of time to call the brutes off. But night was different. It was not merely this dog's pleasure to kill me if he could,

but it was a positive duty. And well he knew it. Even at home of course there would have been dogs, though not the half wolf-like thing this beast was. But to an English dog I should know what to say. Straight on minding my own business and I think the voice would be enough. But the Cahors brute only seemed the more infuriated by my voice. '*Etes-vous alors un bon chien?*' Something must have been wrong with my accent once more. I had to stand by a pile of road-maker's stones bombing the beast as he circled round and round me for the best part of half an hour until, in fact, some one came. Then it was a girl with an early milk-cart, and though she easily called off the dog, her own welcome was scarcely much warmer. A foreign tramp with pack and big stick is, after all, at dusk or dawn hardly an object of confidence in any country. And so it was all along till proper daylight. It put an end to my night-walking ambitions. As the old Quercy proverb has it, 'Eet ees ze early Pilgrim who does get zee bird.' I proved its truth.

With daylight the great Route Nationale to Montauban, Toulouse, and the south was well behind me to the left, and the next main artery of traffic down through Agen to Auch and the Pyrenees was perhaps eighty miles ahead of me. Between lay a sort of No Man's Land, with no railways, no main trunk roads, no nothing particular of any sort. Mile after mile it runs in a sort of endless plain, only broken here and there by island townlets, big villages each standing atop a steepish hill. There was one such that I came to later. Miradoux is its name, and one would think that with a really smart publicity

agent it could be boosted into a regular English colony for artists. As it is, not a soul seems ever to have heard of the place. There is a market-house with notices of the *arrondissement* and the *canton* plastered up round its pillar-walls, and the remains of an advertisement of a travelling play company that visited the town in 1927. On the cobbled stones underneath they hold the market, and then upstairs is a sort of town hall, palace of justice, town clerk's office and all combined. There is a church up some steps, and a tiny square of little shops. An hotel from whose lavatory at the back one sees one of the finest sunsets in the south, and a High Street that would be a good twelve feet wide were it not that half the space is taken up by the chairs and tables that the residents drag out as soon as the heat of the sun has passed. It must take a full two minutes to walk slowly from the town's throbbing heart down that little street, but at the bottom it is worth the walk. It ends in an odd sort of semicircle, and one looks over it sheer down on to the fields below, and then across to where the mountains of Armagnac are glowing fiery red in the sunset. My eyes must have been a little dazed in the half light, for at first glance I did not pick out quite what the semicircle meant. And then the man who was with me, and who was trying to talk to me, made me understand. 'I think,' he said as he kicked the edge of the semicircle, 'that you English were here once before.' And then I remembered. It is true that he went on to make a mocking movement with his foot as though to indicate that we English had also been kicked out. But I understood.

We did withdraw from that part of France

owing to diplomatic reasons, but it took a Hundred Years' War to make us do it. And then we left our mark pretty firmly on the country. That semicircular ending to Miradoux's High Street is not an ornament, but a *bastide* that has lasted since the Middle Ages. We English had built it, and we had built one in every village worth having in the country. It was a battlement, a fortress, and we had battlemented all those townlets that stood high on their hills, strongholds of the English power from which the chain-mailed hand might the better hold down the conquered plain. We even left scraps of our language there, and after centuries and centuries there at the other end of France they speak of our English 'hay' for the stuff that one gives to horses. It is the proper and only word of course. 'All right' is another expression that has lasted generations after generations, though here it is fair to say that the ignorant Frenchmen now pronounce it all wrong. I felt quite a little glow about it, and when that conversationalist seemed to sneer as he made his boot gesture I retorted with '*Certainement non*'. As he laughed I suppose he realized his mistake.

The next ten days or so passed uneventfully enough. Not that down there where the departments of Tarn-et-Garonne and of Gers meet there was not plenty to see. It is our old English province of Gascony, and ninety-nine out of a hundred travellers would have found a gold-mine of interest in it. But I was missing all the right things, seeing them through the wrong glasses. There was Auch, with an archbishopric and a cathedral whose history is all mixed up with the Saracens, and cut down the hill-side in the middle of the town a vast State stairway that ought to

have sent me into a rhapsody of antiquarian enthusiasm. And what I remember of the place was a suburban street all criss-crossed with fairy lamps swinging from strings, a little band playing in a garden, apparently from sheer joy of their own music, and couples dancing gravely in the roadway itself. There was the utmost punctilio about the business, with none of the giggling or horseplay of a Hampstead Heath. Instead the young demoiselles sat demurely on benches or doorsteps, under the vigilant eyes of a *maman* always somewhere in the background, and prospective partners proposed themselves with all the decorum of a dancing school of the England of the 'eighties. There was an odd democracy, too, which struck odd to foreign eyes—young soldiers from the garrison squiring girls of obviously the well-to-do classes. And above all the gaiety a perfectly astonishing note, so far as I could see, of absolute innocence. But I ought not to have seen it at all when I might have been better busied in reading up the Saracenic archaeology of the city. There was Lectoure with a history that has something to do with the Romans and a cathedral much too big for the little town. And my memory of the place is of a small boy throwing a stone at the foreign tramp. He did it of course on the sound instinct of ancient principles, but I rather hate to mention the little matter, because I did not quite like the idea of letting the Republic know how extraordinarily badly one even of her junior citizens had been taught to throw. On the other hand, I was rather proud of my reply, which, falling neatly in a bush about a yard behind the enemy, made him positively jump. There was Lauzerte, and the good Monsieur le Curé le Doyen had spent

a scholarly lifetime in writing its story: all about the English domination and the Hundred Years' War and the remains of the fortifications discovered round the brow of the tiny town, perched high up on its island hill in perpetual warning to the miles of plain around it. Savage fighting there must have been in the old days round where now the great church stands. A basilica it is to distinguish it from the minor and lowlier church lower down just at the bend of the road that corkscrews round and round the summit. And all of it was wasted on one unworthy traveller. For all that I remember of the place was that it was from the little balcony of its hotel that I first saw the lightning. A hundred miles or so yet away, far to the south though it was, it reminded me to plan carefully the days for the rest of the little promenade. The heat seemed to have lasted since the world began. Never in France for years, they told me, had there been known such a *chaleur*. But the storm must burst one day, and that Western Front at a distance too great to hear its peals was serving as a symbol and a warning. Those monstrous heights towering heaven high as the flashes lit them up must of course be clouds. It was incredible that they could be peaks. And yet no doubt was possible as to the scene of the battle. It was over the Pyrenees. And it was to the Pyrenees that I was marching.

Nearly a fortnight later an Englishman in Lourdes referred doubtingly to the 'jolly good staff-work' which must have been needed to bring me up to scratch to the very hour that over a month ago I had named. Did he think, then, that I had cunningly contrived a series of picture post cards at convenient stages, travelling myself

comfortably by train! Because it is what I should have thought myself. The truth was that had I wished I could have been in Lourdes full two days earlier than I was, so far ahead had two perfect miracles of lifts offered by motor-cars placed me. It hardly fits in well with the romance of pilgrimage and 'Lorry-Hopping for Our Lady' would make a headline too modern to ring prettily. But it would have been about the truth, and I at least had no shadow of delusion on the point. Nor was I hunting for an extra romance of unneeded hardship. My business was to get to Lourdes afoot unless anyone freely offered me a lift. Meantime I had money enough left to carry me through for another ten days or so. I had learned at Rocamadour that the Infant was happily putting on her ounces, and I had nothing in the world to worry about. Let me but behave myself with ordinary decency and Our Lady, with addresses at Lourdes, at Rocamadour, at Laval, and at every other place in the world, would, I knew, pray well for the child. That, then, was all there was in the business. Though I must, to be sure, for my own comfort take care not to reach Lourdes too soon, or there would be nobody there to meet me. And I should have no money. Not that that would have worried me over-much. It might be as well, too, in planning out the remaining march to consider the chances of that tropical storm. To hasten slowly might be best so as rather to be caught near my journey's end and not out here in the wilderness.

So village after village passed. And every one I remember by the wrong things. This one once saw Alaric, king of the Visigoths, and I think of it as the place I watched a chicken being dressed.

I could not help it ; for I was sitting on a bench outside its hostelry when the woman brought her victim out. She plucked it, she drew it, she performed culinary miracles upon it. And at some moment I suppose the creature died. But she forgot to kill it. I watched her. And that evening I passed the inevitable *poulet* at my meal.

It was the point that I liked about least in all that I saw of France, their beastly cruelty to brutes. It was not that they were ever actively cruel, but that they never seemed to count that any but humans had feelings at all. There was a market-place up somewhere in the north I had seen, with the farmer women, their sellings over, sitting at the little tables in the shade round the edge of the Place ; and in the middle, right out in all the cruel blaze of the sun, were their purchases—little calves with their legs tethered, bundles of hens with legs tied up like firewood, sheep with their poor parched noses seeking desperately for any scrap of cover—and there was none. In England there would have been an inspector and a serious police court case and the heaviest of fines. And it could not have happened at all. Indignant public opinion would not have allowed it for an instant. But here nobody noticed. And those kindly market women sat hour after hour at their friendly gossip and their little glasses, and if anyone had told them they were cruel they would have been insulted. What, when they almost give their lives to husbands and children ! But for the calves, that is different. They are but animals. I asked an educated Frenchman about it.

Even the cats were different, hunted animals kept only as an economic necessity to prey upon

vermin, and starting if a human spoke to them as if expecting the inevitable stone. Never once did I see a cat in the position of our own James. Her name, we admit it frankly, is a misfortune, having been somewhat prematurely bestowed upon her on her birthday, the feast of course of the great apostle of Spain. But it is her only misfortune and second only to the Infant she rules our household. And up and down England there must be a James in every other house. But not in France.

I think that only once did I even see a pet dog on anything like the footing of an English dog. And even that was a ridiculous beast. Order him 'Attention' and he would balance a lump of sugar on his fat nose. Say 'Pom' and he ate it. It was a poor trick for a dog, and, even so, not always successful; for though I spent an evening and two basins of hotel sugar in drilling him, I never once was able to time him properly. I suppose I failed to throw the correct accent even into my 'Pom'. So much for the boasted modern language teaching of the English school of thirty years ago.

But it is all wrong of course to generalize on other peoples' countries. In six hundred miles, for instance, I saw one drunk and one teetotaller, and it would be so easy to say that All Gaul is equally divided between drunkards and teetotallers! The drunk was a workman shouting from across a road, and a priest with me said that he was abusing both of us, cursing the Pope and God and every one remotely connected with either. 'It will pass,' he said, 'and he will be very sorry in the morning. Indeed,' the old gentleman went on with the uncanny knowledge

often vouchsafed to the celibate, 'I think it likely that he will make regrets even to-night. For, see, his wife approaches, and she has not the *air amiable*.' And as I looked at the lady, her moustache bristling with fury as she drew upon her helpless consort, I realized something of what the consequences of sin might mean. Heaven knows what the man had been drinking. Plenty of the stuffs seem potent enough. But it can hardly have been honest beer; for in France I always found it a rough convenience to reckon the stuff in terms of kilometres. Eight kilos go to five miles. To save remembering too many figures the pilgrim can count beer on the same ratio. If, for instance, a man could be found of such capacity as to be able to drink five English glasses of ale, then he would be perfectly safe in calling for eight glasses of the French stuff. It can hardly have been beer that my one drunkard had taken. But of their other stuffs I cannot speak.

My teetotaller, on the other hand, was a priest in Limoges, and though I could hardly understand him I did make out that a new clerical school is rising which preaches total abstinence. His enthusiasm, I think, was a little smiled upon by the elder men as something of a harmless hobby-horse. But the rights and wrongs of the case I do not know. But he was the younger sort of priest, the newer kind that travels his beat on a motor-cycle curiously built with a special frame to take the skirt-like soutane. So it is possible that his generation may spread its tenets over France. One might generalize again upon the question of whether France or England is the more up to date. But, again, I simply do not

know—or care. It is true that down in the Midi I saw a whole village turn out eager-eyed to watch an aeroplane, which would hardly have happened anywhere at home, but against that I had to remember their electric light. As far as I could make out it was a national system. Those huge twin telegraph-pole things that, half constructed, we used to see in the war have come to life, and now run the length of every cart-track in the Republic. Not a hamlet, not a cottage so remote as not to have the electric. It is the sort of thing that we at home have been hearing about for years, mostly at election times. But over in France they have got it.

One met people, of course, but I do not know that it would be safe to generalize from any that I met. There was, for instance, the young man of one evening in an inn. It was in a little townlet, and there were half a dozen of them in the place, *voyageurs de commis*, I suppose, who were working the place like any travellers in England. And after the communal meal was over, and the three young lady *pensionnaires*, or boarders, in the house had risen from their end of the long table and, giving us their united stiff bow, had left the *salon* to withdraw to their own proper quarters, there to spend the evening in exciting gossip about the business of the local post office where naturally they worked, the men began to talk. Politics, I suppose, after a bit it was, though I could not understand what anybody said and had to sit silently in my place. Bit by bit I could see it plainly one man was winning. Where the others talked only nineteen to the dozen, he was easily doing his thirty and over. As argument after argument was hurled at him across the table he

would turn on the speaker and rend him to tatters, and then wheel about to look for the next man up. In a way, he fascinated me. Never had I seen such scarlet-red lips on any man before. It was like a knife-cut straight across the face as it writhed with the vehemence of his own tempestuous oratory. And he had curly hair, jet black. And more rings on his fingers than I think a man ought to wear. And a red tie. Gradually, as surely as a racehorse rounding the final corner of the course, he was winning, and in a minute he had it all to himself. With the others now silenced, his speech quickened faster than ever, and with arms waving he lashed himself into a perfect furore of argument. God and Poincaré and Mussolini were the only words that I was ever able to catch. Particularly Mussolini, because he kept coming over and over again. The speaker seemed to me from his gestures to disapprove of all three of them; but I do not know. For a solid hour he kept on, till even the three demoiselle *pensionnaires* from the post office must have heard him in their apartments above, as he positively screamed. And every time his breath ran out, he broke for a change into a little song. I do not know what songs, or what about. But the more he talked and the more he sang the stonier grew the listening commercials. His views, whatever they may have been, were plainly not to the taste of his audience. Even I could see that.

And when, after one final gesticulation, he sat down with a suddenness in which one seemed still to hear an echo of the great speech, not a soul moved. Had he made many converts—indeed, any at all? To one man and to another sitting motionless in their chairs round the table he leaned,

looking hopefully for an approval which never came. In a way I was sorry for him. After all that trouble. And when despairing of his own country, he turned in last resort to myself, as though relying at least upon my sympathy, I took my pad and pencil and wrote down my opinions :

'*Je vous bien remercie, monsieur, pour les belles chantes, et je vous prie aprés que nous nous couchons á chanter pour nous la Marseillaise.*'

I had taken a lot of pains about it, and without committing myself to any special political opinions I had thought it an admirably tactful and courteous summing up. I had enjoyed the man's songs, and I had thought that every Frenchman would like to join in their National Anthem. It would be a suitable conclusion to what from my standpoint had been a successful evening. But as the commercial to whom I had passed my effort to be handed across to the orator began to howl with laughter, I realized that once more my unhappy modern languages had let me down. After all, to invite a man to sing *after* one has gone to bed is scarcely a master-stroke of tact.

There was a little old lady whose hospitality I had enjoyed somewhere. I had been trying to talk to a man with a farm-cart in the road, and as I did not talk very well I handed him a paper I had with it all typed out in good French about me and about my trying to walk through to Lourdes. As he got to the last word an idea suddenly occurred to him, and, beckoning me to follow, he took me through a gate and into the manor-house sort of place where he belonged. A minute later and he brought an elderly lady, his obvious mistress, to inspect me and my papers. *Une croyante*—a staunch believer—she turned out

to be, and as such it would be her pleasure to offer the hospitality of her house to a pilgrim. As I bowed my thanks, it came to me how extraordinarily like she was to the late Queen Victoria, little old lady as she was and with an air of intense dignity. Five minutes later still and I was set in the proper place for a pilgrim, the servants' hall—a great stone-flagged room and at one end of it, despite the heat, an enormous fire. I cannot believe that my hostess would have allowed any such transitory circumstance as a mere heat wave to interfere with her domestic policy. There were plenty of us, outdoor servants as well as indoor, for the place was half farm-house, and plenty to eat for us all in spite of the day. It was a Friday. I remember it particularly because there was a sort of fish that I had never met before, and I was a bit uncertain about its bones. Pilgrim or not, the dignity of England has got to be maintained somehow. But that fish was very difficult. Once or twice Madame appeared for a moment at the head of some steps that led from the hall into the more polite regions of the house. I presume that she wished to assure herself that her pilgrim was being properly fed. But on that altitude she looked more queenly than ever. My own immediate neighbour at table was a dear old gentleman who was obviously fresh from his professional labours in the manorial cowshed, and as the meal progressed we offered one another, so to speak, the compliments of the season. At intervals I would come out with '*France trés jolie*', to which he would reply with a '*Vive l'Angleterre*'. It was all extraordinarily nice and friendly. And later on I opened up negotiations with some of the rest of them, and as usual the photograph of my small

stepson in the Crystal Palace grounds was handed round and duly admired. After an hour or so, however, of this sort of thing, Queen Victoria made an unexpected appearance, breaking into a perfect torrent of speech. I could not understand a word of it, but her meaning was pretty plain. If I was a real pilgrim, as I said I was, it was about time that I got on with my pilgrimage, and, anyway, she was not keeping a pack of lazy louts and hussies to waste their time in gossip. We all got up with something of a flea in our ears.

As I was fastening up my pack the old neighbour of the luncheon-table pushed into it a large bottle of champagne. As far as I could gather from his nods and winks it was one of the best in the mistress's cellar. And so indeed it may have been ; for one of the minor regrets of my life is that I was never able to find out. The truth is that without a corkscrew I could think of no way of getting at the stuff without risk of broken glass ; and so I left it on a roadside. How the medieval pilgrims managed I do not know. But in the old manuscripts corkscrews are never once mentioned.

Still another casual meeting was of a character even less in keeping with the traditional pilgrimage idea. A sun-baked road and a little house closely shuttered against the glare, but with the door opening freely into the dark within. And as I passed there came a shout of '*Anglais ?*' and turning I saw struggling from his chair a figure almost frantic less he missed me. A strong man he had been—one of those people who do extraordinary contortions on the music-halls. And did I know the Empire, please, in Leicester Square, London ? Once for some weeks he had given his performance there with a foreign troupe, and

though his English was but fragmentary he still cherished the memory of those glories. Our Empire, it seemed, was the very Mecca of his world. And he had been to Mecca once. It was certain, was it, that I really knew the place?

Alas! I hardly dare tell him that it was now a picture palace; for I think it might have broken his heart. He was out of things now, one understood. The war. And as one looked at him and his poor maimed body, understanding came. It was as well that he had performed his pilgrimage. Never again in this life would he go to Mecca. Never more might he support a pyramid of other humans while the orchestra's kettledrums rolled a crescendo accompaniment to the hazard and the stalls thrilled deliciously lest the swaying pinnacle might come crashing down amongst them. One can almost imagine the sensation of the business. A sharp '*Lá*' like a whip-crack from the keystone man, and the entire human pyramid dissolves delightfully at the angles precisely correct. And as the band bursts into its proper tune, the whole house thunders its applause. And now he had to sit his life through, a broken cripple in a cottage in a back-water of France. The old Empire Music Hall and its Promenade, it is all so ordinary and worldly and not at all in the manner of a pilgrimage, but somehow it seemed to me not the least of the war tragedies that I had seen.

There were plenty of them, Heaven knows! Every tiny hamlet the length of France had its memorial to them. Not so grand, many of them, as ours at home, but with longer lists. Whole scrolls of names they seemed above the eternal '*Morts pour la Patrie*', and for such little villages. There would be waxed flowers tied up with

pathetically untidy scraps of dingy crêpe, or a bit of a tricolour perhaps. But there was always something to show that Remembrance had not died. Those would be the official and communal memorials with nothing to do with religion. And inside the village church would be another memorial for the *Enfants* of the parish, generally just a slab in the wall with the names and a notice that Masses were being said on such and such days for the souls of the war dead. And the churches too had their memorials of those who had not died, but who had been preserved by their prayers or by those of their loved ones. For every church that I saw was almost plastered with its ex voto tablets. 'Thanks to Mary for a Son Preserved. 1914.' That would be one mother, one thinks, speaking to Another. 'For My Husband. 1915. Thanks to Mary.' Not were they all women either. 'For a Loved Brother. Corporal X. 1915.' That would hardly have come in England. But here with the democracy of the faith one was finding tablets, 'General Y.' or 'Private Z.'. And always 'Thanks'. '1914' by itself comes again and again. There must have been hundreds of thousands of them in all France. And then there was the odd memorial that I saw at Solesmes, to then '*Morts pour la Patrie*'. For those poor dead had died for their country in our Isle of Wight. *La Patrie* had turned the monks out. But they had still gone on praying for her. They could not be stopped by any human law that ever was passed.

One's little experiences in the different inns that one came to were in their way instructive. I am genuinely sorry to have to drag them so much into what started as a story of a pilgrimage,

because I am aware that to many far better Christians than myself even the very mention of an inn is an occasion for pain. It is a little curious, considering that the tale of Christianity itself opens in a certain stable connected with an inn, but I know that it is so. But I am sorry all the same. Since, however, it is impossible to walk through France without going to an hotel (the old word *auberge* is about as obsolete as our 'tavern', as I found out when I first asked for one), the places have to come in somehow. There were all sorts. In one, about the very worst I ever stopped at and not far removed from the level of a common lodging house at home, they locked me in my room, a tiny cubicle almost unbearably close up under the red hot roof. At first it seemed to me a very delicate little attention on the part of the management. Many of their customers were rough looking fellows. They might be honest. But one never could tell. It would never had done for any of them, any stray pick-pocket or sneak-thief, to have broken in upon the foreign guest. But I had the story all upside down. The door had been locked to protect the other people from myself. It was not to keep them out, but to keep me in. But, I protested, I had paid in advance, indeed by special invitation. It was true; but the management was not risking my getting away with any other gentleman's trousers.

There was again that other time when the only place in a little townlet that I could find to take me in at all was a sort of eating house for Italians, and not, I fancy, particularly aristocratic Italians either. They were doing something in the way of mending roads, and there must have been

twenty or thirty of them in the gang under their *padrone*. We sat up half the night playing 'mora', and I remember wondering how on earth they managed ever to turn out at daybreak. It is an exciting game. One throws out so many fingers of one's hand, and the other fellow does the same. And one bets on the numbers. Fast as lightning it goes, with a most terrific roar as all the men shout the numbers as fast as possible in excited Italian. A couple of hours it took me to get the general principle of the thing, with nobody who understood a word I said; but after a bit I got the rough idea, and about one in the morning I was for half a minute actually winning some fraction of a farthing. I suppose that on the whole my pilgrimage was rather a mixed affair. There was the time again when I do not know at all where I slept; though, indeed, the affair was less dreadful than to some minds it might sound. Of a certainty there was a bed, the Madame at a little *estaminet* had assured me when I first called there in early evening. And dinner too. But washing or changing one's chemise for that dinner seemed impossible. A dozen times I must have asked her about my room, but it was always 'Presently, monsieur.' Never once could I get the lady to tell me directly where the place was. Her answers were invariably in what one might call the *oratio obliqua*. Nor was it until long after dinner and until dark had come that I was shown the mysterious place, and then it was across the road, and her husband took me to it. It was a good bed in a fine room in an empty house, and from Monsieur's coming across at break of day to conduct me back to the little restaurant my private impression is that some neighbour was

away on holiday and that I was set to sleep in her bed. For it was a lady's room. But I trust that I am causing no scandal.

It was not all like that, of course. Now and then one came across some country hotel as good as anything in England, and as far as food and prices went a good deal better. Indeed, it afterwards occurred to me that if in every place I had had the impudence to strike the best hotel, and strike it boldly, I should, even looking like a tramp, have fared far better than when begging humbly round the smaller places. There was one little town, for instance, where they rejected me in public-house after public-house, and yet where when I marched with the boldness of desperation into the one good hotel they accepted me almost without question. Was it, asked the Monsieur le Patron, a gigantic southern Frenchman in chef's cap and apron, that by chance I knew the Carlton Hotel in London? But of course I knew the dear old Carlton (not that I have ever actually been inside the place, but that twice daily for years I have seen it from a bus). And I knew too the streets round it, le Haymarket, le Pall Mall, and the rest of them. *C'est bien!* For it appeared that Monsieur in youth had served his apprenticeship there in some capacity as minor cook. He had lodged, it seemed, in the Fulham Road, and luckily I knew that too. All, then, was of the most regular; of a certainty there was a chamber that was vacant. Monsieur made a noise like a sergeant-major, and within the second a smart Suzanne was preceding me up the hotel stairs, while a slightly bewildered boots person was reverently carrying off my simply filthy old hat. I was a genuine Englishman and entitled to my

caprices. But they had turned me out of every other place in the town.

Had they only been able to foresee the future they might have treated me with more respect. For, as I found out afterwards, I was going through France in a perfect blaze of glory, always about a fortnight too late to be of the faintest use to me. For the regional papers were taking me up after I had gone. One can easily imagine the sort of thing. 'Are our fellow-citizens aware,' the Tarn-et-Garonne *Trumpeter-Guardian* (with which is incorporated the Béarn *Bugler*) may have asked, 'that a shabby-looking individual whom some of them may last Thursday week have seen being ejected from the deservedly popular *estaminet* of the Widow Paulus in our Market Place, was in reality an English gentleman of the utmost distinction? Thanks, however, to a most searching and costly investigation undertaken by our own Special Commissioner, we are able to announce that our honoured guest was later able to find refreshment at the Café du Midi in the rue-Ste.-Marie.' That sort of thing, and it chased me all through France just too late to be of any use.

And then there was one time that I slept openly in a private house as a paying guest. But that was the only time. At home of course in Hornsey it is impossible for you to see into our house. Because of the flower-pot in the window. It is true that being Catholics we are forbidden by the Inquisition rules from having a big Bible to stand it on, but we try to make up for that by having a bigger flower-pot than our neighbour's. Anyway, you cannot see in. But our privacy is as nothing when compared to the privacy of the French. I had always thought that they had none, that they

lived their lives in cafés and restaurants, that they even had no word for 'home', so little had they a use for it. But it is all wrong. As well might they say that we English have no word for 'wife' because '*femme*' means 'woman' too. The truth is that these people who drag their chairs and tables on the pavement of a night reserve within their homes a privacy infinitely deeper than our own. And I was therefore ever so surprised when, latish one night in a shabby little café, a customer asked if I would care to sleep *chez lui*. I had only just got into the town, only just entered the café. There had just been time to ask if they had a bed, and they had not. And while I was thinking what to do next, out came this extraordinary invitation. I believe that the man had followed me into the place.

In an instant all my instincts were on guard; for I had the Infant to think of, to say nothing of my wife. I am not pretending that I had been an innocent or a good man, and may be I was taking this business far too carelessly and flippantly. But that is one thing, and there are others. And I was not taking all this trouble to walk across France just to fall headlong into the sort of sin that one spells with a capital S. What was this man? A tout for a gay house? Crook, confidence man? And ignoring him I sat down as though he had not been there. Anyway, one might as well eat before one starts the weary hunt for another possible bed, and while I ate I watched the man. For he had sat down too. If, thought I, he was a crook, then at least he seemed the meekest of his brand that I ever met; for so far from any swaggering self-assurance with the other customers, he was being treated with a kind of

good-humoured contempt, as though he scarcely counted in the world of men. A shabby little fellow he was in the seedy coat that might have belonged to the hard-up clerk, not a bit like the other customers—workmen, navvies, market-men. Half-starved, I thought he looked, and I was thinking that if he came with any nonsense I could almost have killed him. But he did not come with anything at all. I was expecting the offered drink, and did not get it. He was not having anything himself, not even smoking, but sat at a bare table in a kind of hopeless expectation. Just looking at me all the time. He had the sort of eyes that sometimes one sees in a dog—hope for a bone, expectance of a repulse or a kick. And suddenly it dawned on me that he looked hungry. If, I thought, as I sipped my coffee, you are touting for the devil, you must be working on a poor sort of screw, for you do not look to me to be worth a penny. And with the feel of the handle of my stick in my hand I paid the reckoning and made for the door. We will go, I thought, and see what happens. If there are any heads to be broken, it will not be mine that will be the first. Outside in the unlighted street he was slipping along by my side, sometimes a yard or so ahead, but always looking back to see that I was following. And as we came to the outskirts of the townlet and to the door of a cottage from which no light appeared, I took a tighter hold of my stick. Heavily curtained, I thought (for I read my novels at home), and in a second the gilded vice will appear and the row begin. And as the door opened a woman came with a small child in her arms. It was dark inside. but they hurried to light a single candle. And then as I picked out the shabby room and saw the

empty places where this and that piece of furniture must have stood, it began to dawn upon me that for perhaps the five-thousandth time I had been all wrong again.

There was not any mystery. The little man had wanted the eighteen pence which anyway I should have had to pay for a bed, and with the rare foreigner who seemed not to know where he was going and not the sort to demand the best, he had seen his chance. That was all about it. He must have wanted that eighteen pence pretty badly too, for I think that he risked his own country's laws with the taking in for pay of a foreigner in a house unregistered. But that was nothing to me. I do not dislike children, and in five minutes I was friends with the little girl. We were all friends together, and I began indistinctly to understand something of the position of the pettiest clerk in a petty town in a country where they count in terms of farthings. This was no 'France' to him, there was no romance about the village. It was his Hornsey, and a million times more so where he must work interminably without holiday or hope. And as it suddenly entered my head to announce that half a crown was the usual honorarium that I expected to pay for a bed I thought that Madame would almost have fallen round my neck.

In a house of two rooms where they have only got one bed and everything has got to be rearranged and makeshifts hurriedly put up, things are a little difficult, but it was managed somehow. Madame seemed miraculously to combine the efficiency of an hotel manageress with what I have always imagined to be the manners of a duchess, and as I watched her quick, deft movements I marvelled

once again at the French woman. Monsieur, on the other hand, I am bound to say, seemed a little helpless and, so to speak, 'stood by' rather in the fashion in which I should have done myself. From his photograph on the wall as a dashing cavalryman I should judge him more successful as wooer than as husband. In a way he had my sympathies.

And in the morning we all breakfasted together under a trellis-work arrangement in the back garden, Madame passing the family bottle of wine with an air that would have made her fortune in an English melodrama of high life. But when afterwards I asked her casually for a certain place, there was none attached to the cottage, and with a generous gesture of her hand she placed at my disposal the whole of the south of France. It was a business that had often worried me. It had taken many days to overcome my Britannic prejudices against even the mention of such a thing to a woman at all, and then every madame in France had taken my inquiry as absolutely a matter of course. Things seemed to me most peculiar; for there were other things in which they seemed meticulously particular. Once, for instance, a serving woman at an *estaminet* had been carrying three chairs at once, and of course I had rushed across the floor to take them from her. But it was all wrong. I must not do that. Apparently it would compromise *la petite*, unless indeed I was actually affianced to her. And I should not have liked that at all; for I hate ladies with heavy mustachios. But when it came to lavatories, there was the south of France! But they seemed to think nothing of it. Under that sun, they explained, necessities were different.

Only if one was anxious to see conditions really primitive one ought to go to Spain. I was not anxious.

IX

WEEKS later some one asked me what books I had carried in my pack all this time. I think there had been memories of the 'Hundred Best Books' and of a scholarly figure now walking a little, now, as the mood struck him, sitting down under some convenient shade to refresh his mind with, say, a little Horace. *Recubans sub tegmine fagi*': is that Virgil or Horace? Anyway it is an appropriate tag that fits the pretty picture. Only it was not true. For there was no Little Horace accompanying me. There was nothing at all. I had not got a book, and did not want one. And for the very first time since, I suppose, seven years old I never read a single line of anything. All my life I had been reading, a book a day, two books a day. Anything and everything that came my way, Shakespeare of course always excepted. For always there had been romance between their covers. And now for the very first time I was living romance first-hand. What need then of reading it! If one wanted mental exercise, then what about the posters on the walls? There was some gentleman in Toulouse with a hundred thousand 'paletots' to sell — paletots for messieurs, for dames, for young people. And for a hundred miles round he had plastered every convenient barn to tell the world about his paletots. And what was a paletot? The little problem exercised me many a day, nor was it solved until at home I was able to turn up a dictionary and

find an overcoat. On a bench, again, outside a tiny *estaminet* in the intervals of watching three wasps intoxicate themselves in a sticky overflow of *limonade* and *vin blanc très ordinaire*, I picked up idly a sheet of a paper which an earlier client had left there, and was distressed to read under the 'English News' of an accident to the *Royal Sovereign* pleasure steamer. On her trip to Margate, it appeared, she had run into a storm of the most frightful, and the lives of her brave captain and passengers had actually been endangered by the crashing of her 'hublots'. For kilometre after kilometre the word intrigued me, nor was it till after research at the Hornsey Free Library that I was enabled to translate it into side-lights. Trifles perhaps, but with such problems any Little Horace would have been a positive nuisance. I lack, I fear, the proper mentality of a real pilgrim.

In appearance too I fell far short of the genuine article. For he, we know, was always picturesque, while as I reviewed myself I was about pure tramp and as little beautiful. For two hundred miles now I had had no change of clothes at all, and under a sun where a shirt goes wet through within the hour, my twenty or twenty-five miles a day had played the dickens with me. Not that I was making anything like that nowadays. Perhaps fifteen miles, or even some days twelve. The lack of need apart, it was almost impossible to do more, for my boots were nearly through at last. The tramp's steady shuffle that so often at home had raised my contempt was now my natural gait. I understood why he hardly raised his feet from the ground. I was a tramp myself, the real article and no playing at it. I did unpleasant

things to my socks in ditches; I spent anxious hours in worrying out the French word for 'cotton'; needle I knew, but I wanted the other thing too. The case was urgent, and I only got it just in time to save my trousers in an awkward place where weeks of sweat had rotted the stitches of a seam. Unpicturesque trifles of course, but they counted. Just about the time that I was walking there was another tramp doing much the same thing at home in England. I read all about it with tremendous interest when I got home. A real writing man he was, and the *Daily Express* had sent him out to discover actual conditions 'on the road'. Marvellously good stuff it was too, and every bit of it true. But there was just one tiny point about being a tramp that they had not put in. I expect they did not like to. And that was just the hardest point of all in the game—the way the women look at one. It is always the same. The bad ones will stare and snigger, and one knows what to say to them. Even with my French I know how to be rude enough, though it was not at school that I learned the words. But the good women, that is different. For they will turn their eyes away, in the deliberate effort not to hurt a case so painful. And it is not pleasant. But I do not wonder at a great paper not caring to put it in.

Being a tramp was not so bad, though. It may be that under the cover of middle-class respectability I really have the tramp's mentality; for I fitted into the business like a glove. Somehow it was not worrying me nearly as much as it ought to about going often hungry and being always filthy and my boots going through and not having had a bath for a month. And all the time with

my steady shuffle I was getting on. Never once all the way did I turn back so much as a single yard. I made rather a point of it. What did worry me a bit, and I think it was the only thing, was that lately I was somehow losing the habit of sleep. It may have been the sun, or over-fatigue, or something. But whereas at the start I had slept like a hedgehog, now I was losing the trick altogether. I got a bit scared about it, and at one little place I passed where I saw a chemist's shop I dropped in to ask the man for something for it. Of course I could not tell him all about it, so I wrote it down : *' Quelque chose, s'il vous plait, pour inducer sommeil,'* and left him staring at the strange tramp who had pushed the paper across at him with one of his last-hundred-franc notes. I stared a bit, too, when I tried to read the label on what he gave me, for it said ' Hyŏscine ', and I had thought that was the stuff they did the Crippen murder with and that it was a dangerous drug and illegal to sell. But perhaps it is all differently made up in France. Anyway I took it and it did the trick.

While I was walking I worked out some ideas of my own. It is possible that they sound ridiculous to other people, but I was very certain about them, and have been ever since. All round me, I made out, was an invisible world, less than an inch away—as close in fact as the air that I was breathing. And with this world I was in touch, as it were, by the kind of invisible telephone that one calls prayer. Yes, of course, in a way one had known that all one's life. It comes in the penny catechism and the priests tell one about it at church. But all in a hazy sort of way. But now for the very first time in my forty-six years it

was coming absolutely literally true, as true as the steam-engine or anything else real. It was exactly like using a house-telephone through into the next room, and a second later back comes the answer with infallible promptitude. There was only one thing in the world that could cut that wire, and that was an act of sin. But, barring that, the thing worked as definitely as any wire that one could see. It may be, of course, that every other Catholic in all the world knew all about it. But I at least had not. It had never been 'real' to me before, and for a while I was as excited about my invention as though I had discovered America. Had anyone, I wondered, ever thoroughly explored the full possibilities of the thing? Not saints, I meant, and mystics and people like that of special sanctity, but ordinary folk like, say, myself. For there seemed no end to its potentialities.

One had of course to use the 'wire' properly. It was no use to pray that the next kilo-stone might miraculously show a certain figure. One must not, in fact, lay down conditions at all. Of course I had in a way prayed (with missings) all my life, but either with the stock prayers that one is taught or with, so to speak, demand notes: 'Please may I have an extra three pounds ten next week for the school bill?' or 'Can this or that cheque due to me be expedited a bit?' But that, I saw now, was all wrong. It did not work. If, I thought, one is drowning one does not call out to the bank to 'Kindly assist me to flex the muscles of the left leg, extend the right arm', and so forth. In other words, one does not lay down conditions. But to the cry 'Save me', it comes every time. But it is probable that I put the business clumsily.

It worked, however, my way with startling

infallibility as again and again I tried it. Take, for instance, this one simple instance. A small village at the top of a steepish hill in southern France. Miles away I had seen it across the plain, and for hours I seemed to have been looking for it—ever, in fact, since soon after daylight. And as I had toiled up the road towards it under an absolutely blinding sun my deplorable boot had almost tripped me up in a little pile of dust as it lay inches deep. I must have been pretty tired with the tramp. And now that I had got there I could see the place properly. Two streets at right angles of little houses, a church closed for the noon-tide hours, two public-houses, and that was about all there was. Not a tree or shade up there on the height, not a hedge to mark where the streets faded out on to the broiling hill-side beyond. And then they would not have me at the inn. One does not blame them, but it was the fact. A dead silence from the half-dozen regular customers sitting there in the single darkened living-room, and from the Patronne a '*Pas dè limonadè, pas de bière, rien á manger.*' Nothing. The house had miraculously run out of every possible supply. For me. And the other of course would be just the same. Where no stranger comes once in a year news travels fast, and from every opened door of every shuttered cottage eyes unseen in the cool dark would be watching suspiciously. Out here in the glare what then can one do? A next village miles away over in the heat-haze would be probably impossible, and yet where else was there to go? And as standing stupidly I considered the point, I caught sight of the usual village statue of the usual Our Lady of Lourdes with the usual fixed, painted smile. At best it was a little statue there

in its eternal white-and-blue, and there was no hope of even a hand's breadth of shade to be had there. As I looked, I could see that the hand itself was almost burning under the heat. It seemed, so it struck me, to be pointing, but only up a merest grass-tracked mockery of a road that obviously led to nowhere at all. Just a single house, and the thing tailed out on the pasture of the hill-side. And as I looked again at the smile, it seemed to me strangely reminiscent, as though I had seen it before on the faces of ordinary mothers: when they are playing with their little ones, and there is something hidden and the mother knows all about the tiny mystery. A 'Why don't you try?' sort of smile it seemed. And squaring my back on that inhospitable hamlet I marched up the little track to nowhere in particular.

It was a curious coincidence, I suppose one would say, that an instant later, at the precise moment that I passed the single house, that an angel should have appeared. Disguised as a small girl with bobbed hair she came out into her garden, and catching sight of me stood staring for a moment. 'But aren't you English?' she said, and when I said that I was (for it is a thing that I never disguise) she asked me if I knew London. It seemed that she went there to school, only it was holiday time now, and we were both most interested about it all, and were talking things over when Monsieur the angel's father appeared, a southern Frenchman with neatly creased clothes of immaculate tussore silk and a perfect understanding of English.

I spent the afternoon there, and there was nothing supernatural about the business. A

French gentleman who has his business in London and visits his ancestral village only for the summer holidays, what in the world could be more prosaic? Our conversation even was not in the least of miracles, but rather concerned the varying merits of different schools and of the advantages of this suburb or of that. His business had nothing in it of romance, for he told me all about it. And only as with the coming of the cool we parted did that man of business mention that if he had been able to assist me I might in return perhaps pray for him and his at Lourdes. But as I passed the little statue at the bottom of his turn and looked once more at the smile, it seemed ever so little to have changed again. The child had solved the liftle problem of its hide-and-seek.

With it all one had of course to work, and little problems kept cropping up. One cannot telephone for a miracle at every turn. The post office, for instance. I was not getting any letters, but one has to send them. Just a few lines a day or perhaps a picture post card. Probably even in the Middle Ages something of the sort was demanded just to show that the man really was on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was not putting in his seven years in another place altogether. My trouble was posting the things; for the French village office has a trick of shutting down from twelve to two, just the very hours that I was in a village. Once, I remember, the young ladies were five minutes late in returning from their *déjeuner*, and I suppose I must have looked a little of what I felt, standing there in the sun waiting; for as I left I heard one of them say something about *les Anglais*. She must have read the address on my envelope. These little Government

officials are the same the world over. Always ready to take advantage unless one is firm with them. So through the slit of the letter-box I called out to them, '*Angleterrè très bon*', and left it at that. And from the sudden silence of the gossip I hope that it may have taught a lesson. But my picture post cards, I understand, carried with them a certain social cachet in small boys' school circles. So they may have been worth the trouble they entailed. Was I not in the famous 'South of France', where rich men go, disporting myself no doubt with the rest of the fashionables?

Next to my boots, which were now in no case to win the applause that for the first five hundred miles they had invariably gained, the thing about me that most astonished France was my age. Again and again I had the question, and the answer of '*Quarante six*' always seemed to surprise my audience. But by forty-six, they said, one was already an old man in France. I should have had a beard and a carriage of slow dignity, and not be walking about like a young man. They put it down, I believe, to their conscription, the intensive training, so some one told me, taking it out of their young men and ageing them before their time. I do not know, of course, whether it is true or not; but once I saw a French regiment on the march and it struck me that it was pretty severe going. I am not a soldier, of course, but I was the usual amateur article for the usual four years, and I had never seen anything like this before. I stopped on the road to stare at the men. Very young they seemed to me, and carrying an equipment that at least appeared far heavier and bulkier than ours. Steel-helmeted as they were under that sun, it

must have tried them a bit. And the column was not marching at all with our regular, even stride, but, so it seemed to me, almost anyhow in a sort of shuffling jog-trot, the men keeping up with the pace as best they could. Their non-coms. did not seem the same either. Our sergeant led us, and though we were unable always to see exactly eye to eye with the man, at least we felt him to be one of us. But these French non-coms. were literally driving their men, and driving terribly hard at that. Even the casual looker-on could see the difference. They were taking it all so very seriously. Marching easy in the country, we used to sing or talk or make improper jokes. But here there was not a smile that I could see in all the length of that column. And with all their helmets and the stuff on their backs, they were making a most terrific speed. I could not reckon it out in figures, but it must have been twenty per cent faster than our own average regulation pace. If they do that all the time I am not surprised at the getting old early business. They did not look so particularly smart either in the little details of things. With us every strap had to be just right and every buckle polished up just so; but these people seemed to hang their equipment on almost anyhow. And I had always thought that the French almost worshipped the spit-and-polish of soldiering. Somewhere I remember once reading that they will not even allow their President to ride on horseback, lest he should look so overpoweringly military as to bring about another *coup d'état*, with himself as Emperor. Whether it would even be permitted to him to let himself be nicknamed 'Galloper' I do not know. But presumably some sort of covenant could be enacted by which he

could pledge himself at least never to do any galloping!

About the women and their ageing no question exists that I could see. A day of a length unknown in England and under a sun unparalleled at home, and work or toil which for best part of a century must have been with us forbidden to their sex, all circumstances combined to drive them into old-womanhood where in London they would have been but young. '*Anglais?*' asked one such that I spoke to down in the farthest south, and to my affirmative continued with the surprising dogma that 'All the English have beautiful teeth.' In my case it was a pretty tribute to my dentist, but I take it that she had been thinking of the foreign tourist women that from her cowsheds she must have seen in their cars riding daintily past from Pau and other centres. It must, I think, have been a last flicker of jealousy and broken vanity. Her own teeth, poor soul, were anything but beautiful. But when we came to the usual age question, I broke fresh ground by asking hers, and it was thirty. But I had taken her at least for double.

The child in France, I thought, should be a happy little creature, with its worshipping parents and no apparent restrictions of any sort. One place I remember, and I was English then? Was it that I came from London? And they brought out a boy of perhaps eight and introduced us with a certain ritual. He too was going to be a sort of Englishman some day. For when he was old enough he was coming to London to learn to be a waiter. But of course when he had learned he would return to his own country and take an hotel. I expect they knew all about it, and I expect too

that they would turn out perfectly right—in spite of any immigration regulations that there might be at Dover. Us both having, so to speak, a connexion with London, it made a sort of bond between us, and in a minute the child was offering me a liqueur. Nasty stuff it was, as strong as brandy and evil-tasting to my unaccustomed palate, but with my glass the lad brought another for himself, while mother smiled her pleasure at the pretty sight.

There is another and pleasanter memory that I have: of a little hotel in a small town with a tunnel-like gateway opening into the courtyard in its centre, where an awning-covered gallery running round its inner walls gave access to the shuttered rooms. I was sitting outside that archway only just in the shade and was trying to talk to the Patron of the place. In the sunny lane no human soul was to be seen, only a large and placid cat asleep in the exact centre of the road. Somewhere in the distance was the regular ring of a blacksmith's hammer, and but for the sound the whole town might have been asleep. The place, I ventured to say, was charmingly tranquil. And Monsieur, with a proud glance behind him where half a dozen dejected flowers drooped half withered in a parched-up little bed through the gateway, reluctantly agreed. It might have been worse. For trade of course, and he shrugged his shoulders, but it passed. It was not such a bad little town as such little towns went. It suffered, however, from one grave drawback—the entire commune, it seemed, being infested with apaches. Now, this particular pest would never have occurred to me, for I had thought that it was only places like Paris and Marseilles

where one heard of the people, and to the foreign eye the empty streets had seemed the very quintessence of everlasting drowsiness. But yes, he went on with unexpected heat, the matter was a scandal of the most crying. At any moment, I gathered, down this very street, where now we sat lulled in a false security, might come a rush of the fiercest bandits. He almost spat out the word. And even as I felt for the stick under my chair the wave rounded the corner and three very small girls, in the enormous hats and ridiculously common-sense but abbreviated garments in which the French *maman* during a heat-wave will clothe her progeny, rushed up and, storming their grandsire's chair, almost swept the indignant old gentleman over in their fury. The terror had descended upon us.

And afterwards we all went indoors to the long communal table—grandfather, parents, guest, and children and all. It is none too easy for the Foreign Devil, with his barbaric notions of etiquette, and the nice conduct of some four plates but only a single narrow-bladed knife and its consort, the three-pronged fork, needs management. The grandchildren, I saw, were watching me closely. How late they may have sat up I do not know, but by nine I was out of the place, and out till the dreadful hour of half-past ten. For somewhere was a band in the little town. Its music came floating in gusts down over the red-tiled eaves of the lane. It was a little difficult to find at first. Up and down the main street I walked and past every little café with its half-dozen clients sitting in the dusk in the miniature forest of green-tubbed shrubs. And not a sign of any gaiety fiercer than cigarette smoking.

Into the very heart of the town and the inevitable little Grand Square with its surging population of three people, and still no band. And when indeed at last I found it up a back alley, it was in a sort of loft place over an empty coach-house. From outside, through the little open door where they would throw down hay and the like, I could see two of them, big men in their shirt-sleeves perspiring as they puffed at heavy brasses. Again and again they would go over bits of the same tune, till presently it came to me that it was an amateur band, a sort of workmen's orchestra practising for their own amusement. And presently one of them, looking down from the door, saw me and said something to the others. And a minute later there broke out the triumphant strains of something that was meant to be 'God Save the King'. It was a pretty compliment to a national ally, though I tell you that it is more difficult than it sounds to stand in a public and foreign street bolt upright at a rigid 'attention' when one has grave doubts as to the seat of one's trouserings. But I think that they appreciated my attitude, for immediately they played it again.

Good relations thus established, I secured two of the largest bottles of beer obtainable and tucking them under one arm ascended the ladder that led up to the loft. There were four of them, all as big men as ever I had seen. And, by the way, I had never known before that they play *le Rugby football* in those parts. But they do, and one sees the goalposts as one tramps along. We were all on the best of terms, and the gentleman who was working a kettledrum arrangement with his foot and playing a brass thing at the same time, and who seemed to be conductor, made to

ask me if there was any particular piece that I would like to hear. There was, and I had heard it in a music-hall in London. It is called *La Rêve Passe*, and the man who had sung it made one feel that he had seen Napoleon and his Grand Army. I could not understand a word of the verses, but the thing somehow got into one's blood, and one knew without being told that there had been an Empire and a Little Corporal, and that men had almost fought for the glory of dying for it and him. They had had scenery in London for the thing, and as the last of the tented field of the dream had faded away into the shadowy clouds of the blood-red sky, something came into one's throat and one wanted the refrain to go on for ever, for even without the words it rang of glories unimaginable to an age that paid its one and twopence at the door and came in a bowler hat. I had liked the thing, and I had seen it four times in one week, and here even in these tenth-rate settings of a stable-loft I would like to hear it again. And I said so. Though really I was a little frightened lest by doing it too badly they might kill off its romance for ever.

But first they could not do it at all. They had never heard of it, the leader said. Was it then the very latest success of London? Not yet had it reached them. But it was French, I told them—one of their own songs. Again and again I repeated the title, and still they could not understand me. And suddenly it dawned upon one of them and he said it aloud in quite another accent, and the others laughed. And then ever so softly it began, and the leader was watching my face to see if they really had the thing at last. Little by little those four poor instruments—five

if one counts the foot arrangement—grew louder and louder, until in a minute the thing was going with such a swing as never in London had I heard from the grand music-hall orchestra. And as they started the verse all over again one of the men laid down his trumpet thing and standing full up under the beams began to sing it. There was no scenery here and no great stage, no painted effects of tents. But one could see the things themselves. There in that dirty little loft, it was the actual field, and the Grand Army, and all the countless thousands who believed in the star of Napoleon and the Emperor himself. For it was their dream and not ours, and if we had staged it ever so splendidly, never could we have caught the fire and fury under that shirt-sleeved man's voice.

As the last trumpet-calls rang out and the thing finished, they put it that another beer might not be amiss, and was there anything else I might like? But after that I did not want more. For the beer, it would be my pleasure. Would they care to play their 'Marseillaise' first and we all would go downstairs. So they played it, and I stood up and took my hat off because it seemed proper for a foreigner. But none of them removed their caps. It seems it is not the custom. Only when we got down the ladder, the little alley was almost full of people. I think it was their anthem that had drawn them. So perhaps it was not disrespect about the caps. And that is how it was that I was not in bed till close on eleven.

X

DAYS before I actually reached them I could see the Pyrenees. Half a dozen times I had fancied them in view, and each time it had turned out to be a false alarm of other mountains. But at last came the day when doubt was impossible. There the things were, a monstrous cloud-bank that filled the whole horizon. It was the Pyrenees at last, stretching the breadth of all broad France, and on the other side that cloud-bank was Spain and every one's Castle in Spain. And somewhere in the middle of the monstrous mass lay Lourdes. As each day I crept slowly nearer, a speck moving over the map of France, my standard of values began imperceptibly to change. The begging and praying to be allowed to pay for a meal or a bed grew easier at every stage, until when I was a couple of days or so off the place itself the need ceased altogether for apologetic entry. I think it was called Rabastens, the village where I finally crossed the line, so to speak. For with my appearance at the inn door the Patron merely threw an eye over my general get-up and without a comment said, 'Lourdes?' They had had them before, it seemed. There had been that man last year from Dieppe; would that be farther than from St. Malo? And somebody else from Liège in Belgium. Worse than me that one had been. Now his boots had been quite through. And I began to feel myself something of a poor apology for a pilgrim. Even *la petite* broke in with a memory of a man who had tramped to the shrine from Vienna. In Germany or Austria that had been, and they seemed almost to forgive the man's nationality in the face of

his destination. English, was I? It added one more to the café's collection of memories. And as I slipped out for a moment to try to buy a picture post card, committing the crime of leaving behind me a glass of beer untouched and unpaid for, I added one more to my private collection of social notes. Persons walking to Lourdes, then, are presumed to be of reasonable honesty, at least up to fourpence. For nowhere else in France could I have committed the enormity unchallenged. To Lourdes, apparently, all things are forgiven, even my trousers. But farther back every expenditure of twopence had needed a half-hour's apologia for myself. I might have been one of those public-spirited Americans who, to mark their disapproval of a presidential election, wager to roll round the world in a barrel.

Here, everything was different. '*A Lourdes? C'est correct.*' At Vic Bigorre, a few miles farther on, it was just the same, and Madame la Patronne, with the merest glance at me, signified acceptance of my custom. Of course I was going to Lourdes, for where else in the world could a foreigner in almost rags and tatters be marching along that road? There were English at Pau, it is true, but my trousers scarcely suggested any grand hotels. A bed, and things were just the same. To Lourdes, of course? A pilgrimage, I began to think, was, after all, about as easy as falling off a horse, an equestrian feat that in my impetuous youth I had performed with conspicuous and public success; that is, if one counted the ponies that used to ply on Margate sands. If there were going to be any difficulties at all at Vic they would lie in the direction of getting hold of my letters. Weeks before, back in London, I had been told

about going there, and how at any cost I must call there upon Monsieur le Curé, who would have waiting for me a telegram with the name of the place where I was to stop at Lourdes and how to get hold there of some money, and all the rest of it. My final instructions, in fact, from the paper that was paying my expenses. And besides, I wanted to hear from home. There had been no line since Rocamadour, two hundred miles or so back.

It was not too easy. Monsieur le Curé, as usual, was 'out', not expected back, probably out all night. I had heard the old, old story before. Nor did any 'Lourdes' cut the faintest ice with his housekeeper. Probably every tramp that called told the same tale. Her only anxiety was to shut the door upon me. At home in Hornsey the trick moves me to fury, but here, under the broadening influence of foreign travel, I boldly stuck my boot across the lintel and so held the door against the indignant lady while I scribbled a note in shocking French, and, raising my hat with a courteous gesture, left her, fairly confident that the good Father would miraculously be restored to his home at about the same moment that I left it. It was not ten minutes before he was in the little café looking for me. I had not of course chosen exactly the most fashionable establishment in the village, and his reverence, as he picked me out, seemed to have something of the expression of a respectable Anglican vicar at home asked to do a little favour to a distinguished foreigner and then finding him gnawing fish and chips while lounging at the door of the local four-ale bar. I think the café can scarcely have been his usual house of call, for his shadow in the doorway caused a minor sensation, and most of the customers stood up,

half in courtesy and half in consternation. But he was most polite, and though he refused to have anything, there was a word for everybody in the place and for myself a little bundle of letters.

It is not in every four-ale bar that the vicar pays a call of obvious ceremony upon a passing tramp, and they were all staring at me while I was reading my letters. To the Infant a few more ounces. There had been a night's anxiety—I remembered the Jazz Band Jo-Jo with a feeling of guilt—but it had passed and all was now satisfactory. The cat James had had kittens, and they were doing well too. All in fact was well with the world. And as I ate the shilling dinner with contentment the feeling intensified. I was to stop, it seemed, at the Hôtel St. Lazare in Lourdes. A bed had been booked for me, and with a rare consideration the editor added thoughtfully that he had given instructions for a bath to be got ready against my arrival. It was, it seemed, to be a pilgrimage *de luxe* indeed. Here was a ticket from the excellent Messrs. Cook's of Ludgate Circus with the number of my seat reserved in the return train back to Calais and London. The world was closing in again, and, in a way, I was not too sorry for it. The bath in particular seemed to have a sort of charm or romance, the lure of the unknown. The paper's young man would be looking out for me. I must be sure and let him know at the St. Lazare what day and time and place to meet me.

There was a cyclists' map thing, a 'Carte du Cercle du Grand Tourisme de France', hanging up opposite my table, and in an instant I had it down on the plate in front of me. Tarbes, then Lourdes. The road was direct. There was only

one, and there could be no chance of missing. Let us see. This evening was a Thursday, was not it? And the English pilgrimage with the paper's young man would be getting into Lourdes late on Saturday. I could with a stretch be through next day if I wanted to, but there would be little sense in it. Nobody to meet me, no money, and no bath. I had better loaf through to-morrow to Tarbes, spend Friday night and Saturday there —the rest would do me no harm—and meet the man on the Lourdes road on the Sunday. Thinking it over, I flatter myself that my 'staff-work' was pretty fair for a man who had been a private! Say the fourth kilo-stone out of Lourdes on the Tarbes road, and that will give the man eight kilos, or five miles, for the double walk—all he will want under a sun that he will not be used to. And better make it, say, half-past three on the Sunday afternoon. And as soon as the post office was open next morning I had my letter off to him, registered too at that. I was taking no chances about my bath.

As I dawdled along the flat road to Tarbes I began to feel quite excited about it all. The Pyrenees were now quite close up, and I could see the white patches on their summits. Tarbes gets its water from them, running through the city on a little stream either side of the streets and then coming out the other side into the plain in a sort of irrigation system. In the fields by the road was a whole network of miniature canals with sluice-gates and baby-locks and all. I watched a farmer man working one, and there was not any water for his field. The drought had taken it all. There was no hurry for me now. Journey's End was at hand. And before I got there I was to

have two whole nights and a day in a real town with a little money in my pocket and absolutely nothing to do. I began to count it out, and there was well over a pound. I was in clover. For about a week now I seemed to have been reading about Tarbes, and now I was to see the place at last. Discreetly of course, but I should be in a real city. There is, for instance, its Grand Café Strassburg with no less than fifty different *hors d'œuvres*. It had said so in every advertisement for the last hundred miles or so, and though I knew my place too well to expect to visit the café, it was something to be in a town which could boast such an establishment. All different they were, too. It said so, and while I was amusing myself with unpilgrim-like speculations as to how on earth they could get their fifty, I presently rolled into Tarbes before I had worked out more than eight.

I knew exactly what I was going to do. Certainly 'Lourdes' was all right for the villages now, but whether it would work or not in a city I did not know. And I was not going to waste an hour of my precious time in going the round of petty inns to be rejected at each. And as soon as I found myself in the long, dusty suburb I asked the first man I met for the Gendarmerie Nationale. It took time of course, writing it all out on paper. 'Is it possible, Monsieur le Chef, that you would be sufficiently amiable as to permit one of your *camarades* to accompany me to search for a lodging, it is well understood of the most modest?' They were most civil about it all and even tried to produce an Emilie, presumably one of the men's wives or daughters, who would be learning English on the correspondence principle to help things on. But the lady would not come,

and after one glance at me through the crack of the door disappeared in disorder. I could hear her giggling expostulations several corridors away. Her course had probably not advanced to situations like myself. So we had to do it all on paper.

In the end we got it right somehow, and Monsieur Alcibiades was detailed to accompany me—though what on earth he had been doing wrong to deserve it I cannot say. And when he had strapped on his official revolver and the column of two was all ready to march off, Monsieur le Chef halted us at the very last minute. It would be better, he thought, if I would consent to leave my hat behind in temporary custody. It made the affair so very much more difficult as soon as any prospective host caught sight of that hat.

It is not, one supposes, the best of introductions to an hotelkeeper to be brought by the police, and the first three places we tried were 'full up'. Whether they would have been fuller still had they seen my hat I do not know. M. Alcibiades was getting obviously rattled about the business, and in the Place de Verdun, the city's Piccadilly Circus, thought fit to call into consultation his colleague of the local Agents de Police who was directing the traffic there. Things got a bit confused of course while the experts were talking, and before they had finished we had quite a small crowd around us. Some one on its outskirts was asking eagerly if it was a German they had caught. A month earlier I might have gone almost mad with the situation, myself in rags in the middle of a biggish town and two policemen and a crowd, but now I only laughed, it seemed so funny. In the end the public vote was in favour of my trying to get in at Madame ——'s, and a minute later down a tiny

back street the matter was clinched. On the recommendation of Messieurs the Police, Madame of the first part, hereinafter referred to as the landlady, agreed to lease to me, the Pilgrim of the second part, for a term of two nights, a suitable chamber. There were two, it seemed, available above her eating-house, the one at sixpence a night and the other at eightpence. I chose the more costly and ungratefully fell to wondering what the other would have been like. As I handed over the first instalment of my rental, while M. Alcibiades accepted *un bière*, his colleague of the town police returned to his rather entangled traffic, and Madame gradually ceased talking, the matter was over. I was established and for the time being a citizen of Tarbes.

In its way, and particularly after a thousand kilometres of mostly desolate country roads and tiny hamlets, it is no mean city. Real cafés and real shops, well-dressed civilians and gorgeously uniformed foreign troops, to my eyes it seemed a centre of all the delights. I even saw a real cab and stared at the apparition eagerly. A city to loot indeed! For two nights and a day the sack continued, and I remember that the feeling with which the first morning I woke in my Turkish bath of a cupboard bedroom right up under the roof in the tall house in that little narrow lane was one that had been unknown to me this thirty years or so. No pack to hoick on, no map to worry about. We had broken up. It was the precise sensation of the first day of the holidays.

Every Englishman, of course, who spends a week abroad is under pledge to say something about the inner policy of the country of his visit. My own contribution to knowledge is that cinemas in

Tarbes ring bells by way of advertisement. It is a thing like a burglar alarm, and it rings continuously all the time during the performance. It may not be much of a contribution, but at least I am sure of my facts; because I went to one the very first night, and incidentally to another the second night. This latter intrigued me, for at first glance I had not recognized it for a cinema at all, taking it for a very big café whose hundreds of chairs and little tables had overflowed over about half a market-place. And what was that scaffolding arrangement at the edge of the chairs for? The waiter had told me. He spoke a little English and incidentally probably a little German, a little Spanish, a little everything. 'For the pictures,' of course; 'for at night we are gay and all the world attends us to watch them. Of a certainty we must see Monsieur to-night. It will be a picture that he will enjoy, for its titles will be in English.' It made me a trifle nervous, for the pictures in France are sadly often inclined to be 'French'. So at least I had read somewhere. And titles in English! Could that be something that had failed to pass the Censor at home? Altogether I went in some little trepidation, prepared of course to leave at the slightest signs of any 'Frenchness'.

My anxieties, however, were groundless; for the picture was not even emotional, and indeed dealt exhaustively with the agricultural resources of Hawaii. How it got there I do not know. But it was not a sensational film. Only nobody in the crowd seemed to care as they sat in a babel of conversation, with the waiters hurrying about doing miracles of balancing with their trays. Going from table to table, too, was a Sister, and

there in that crowd, with her white, floppy coif and her black gown with the huge rosary hanging from her waist, she looked so incongruous. She was collecting, but not in our English way. For she never spoke. I watched her. As she came to table after table, she just held out her little bag in silence, standing motionless until she got the tiny coin. And there in all the fun of the fair I never saw one table that refused her. They can not have been all pious Catholics either. Some of the fair anyway did not look it. But she always got the coin.

By and by my waiter came to ask how I was enjoying the picture, and I told him. He even knew that word. I think he was a little proud of airing his English, because by and by he fetched the manager to look at his distinguished customer. With the waiter standing by to translate we had quite a little talk. So I had come all that way and I was going to Lourdes, was I? And where was I going to stop? At the St. Lazare. I was a little proud about it. It was a good hotel. Well, wherever I was going to stop, it was not at the St. Lazare, because the place had been burned down only that very afternoon. It was in the local evening paper. He fetched it to show me. I did not care. They would find me somewhere else. At Tarbes I did not care for anything, I was so pleased with myself. I think I saw everything in the town. There is a park place with a kind of tower like the Monument in it, and you pay half a franc to go up it—only the caretaker lady likes the other half as well—and when you have climbed millions of steps, you come out at the top right under the sky. Straight ahead of you are the Pyrenees, so close that you could almost touch

them. There is a chart arrangement that tells you exactly what you are looking at and a lot of places that you are not. Here is the Pic du Midi, and you can see the snow on it. And here is Mont Maladetta, and this line points straight to Madrid and that to Tunis. They have even got Egypt in. And behind you of course is London. It must be nearly a thousand miles away. And here is Lourdes. You can not see it any more than Tunis, but you can see the peaks on either side of it. It is worth the climb. But however much I wandered about the town I could not make the time pass quick enough. I was so anxious to be off.

And on the Sunday morning I was out before they had opened the café place below me and was almost racing off to Mass. The guide-book says that La Séde (that is what they locally call the cathedral after the Roman *sedes*; the word has lasted all these centuries) is an 'ungraceful structure', but there on that last morning of all it seemed gracious enough to me. It is a huge red-brick place and the Mass was just over at the high altar, but another was beginning in one of the side chapels. By six o'clock in the morning it was full up, only not, so to speak, with a permanent congregation like we have at home. The crowd was always pouring in and pouring out again as one altar would begin its Mass and another finish. The deformed cripple outside the door with his permit to beg must have been doing well that morning. As I passed out myself some one nudged my elbow and pointed to a notice hanging in the porch. It was in Spanish and of course I could not read it, but it was obviously to tell labourers from across the frontier where they could find a confessor in their own language. I had got my

pack on my back and the friendly stranger had taken me for a Spaniard. It was a change anyway from the Pole I had always been up north. By eight or so I had found some breakfast and was striding away on the road to Lourdes. With only a few miles to go, of course I was hours too early. I might indeed have stopped in bed and gone to High Mass. Only somehow I dare not. There are accidents, sprained ankles, all sorts of things, and I was not risking it. Or it might, for all I knew, have been another of those awful grilling days when I should have been glad of the extra time to loaf along.

As a matter of fact, it was not hot at all. Not compared to what I had been used to. English strangers talk of Lourdes as warm, but those last miles struck me as almost on the cool side with a sort of slight mist floating along the dead flat road as it ran up to the very edge of the giant mountains ahead. I suppose it is the snow up above that makes the difference. Anyway, it was easy enough for me. I had in fact to loaf away some hours in a cottage. They let me sit down to *déjeuner* with the family. It was Sunday, and I was going to Lourdes besides. And by three-thirty, to the very tick, I was sitting on the fourth kilo-stone. And there was nobody there.

On the map I had not noticed particularly where the stone was, but for the benefit of future pilgrims one may set it down that it stands in the middle of a roadside village. Because by and by I had a little circle of children round me watching to see what on earth I was waiting for. I suppose they thought that eventually I might produce gold-fish or rabbits or something from my pack. And still I sat, and still the man kept on not coming. I

could see the road ahead for quite a way, and there was not a sign of him. And as I sat there came into my mind a memory of the letters P.S.A. that I have seen over chapels at home in Hornsey, and I thought, this is indeed a Pleasant Sunday Afternoon. I began to count what was left in my pocket. Somewhere about three shillings. London seemed a long way off.

Then the thing suddenly struck me with a regular thunderclap. Why, of course! If that beastly hotel had been burned down the day before, then the man could never have got my letter. He could not be waiting for me on this depilgrimed stone, because he would not know that I should be expecting him. There was nothing more to wait for and, to the obvious disappointment of the children, I rose and took the Lourdes road.

All the spring had gone out of my step now, and under the shadow of those lowering mountains the day began to feel almost sombre. It was not the money or how I was going to get back to London again. That would work out somehow. Cook's or the police or somebody could easily find the fellow somehow. He must be stopping somewhere else, and they would know where. I hardly gave it a thought. The real problem was how in the world I was going to get into Lourdes. I had never been there, of course, but I did know that it was a real town with real hotels and lots of decent English and Americans in it. Walking across France in rags and tatters somehow did not seem to matter. But it was quite another thing facing my own people looking like a tramp. If I only had the man with me it would be different. I dare go in then. But alone! I simply could not do it. I would have to stop outside the place, just

on the edge of the town, and smoke cigarettes and wait till it was dark, and then wander in and find the police and let them clear things up.

And yet was this what I had come for—to care about my clothes in front of a lot of people I had never seen before and would never see again? Had not there been something about a dying baby and walking to Lourdes to pray for her at the great shrine of Our Lady? And now I dare not go in. I would simply have to, and yet I simply could not. And as I dragged forward about as slowly as I could possibly go I wished that I had been eaten by wolves up Limoges way. Anything would have been better than this. But I dare not quite stop, for I would not have started again until it got dark. And it was hours off that yet. I had not felt so miserable all the way. For a month I had been longing to see the Pyrenees, and here they were. Great swelling slopes in the fields just off the road that mounted high up into the foot-hills, and over them again one could see the real peaks themselves. Bigger than Rocamadour, these were, and that set me thinking of the place and all the other places I had been to: Notre Dame of the Oak, and all the other Notre Dames; and now that I had come at last to the greatest of them all I was ashamed to go in. Most Puissant Lady of Rocamadour, was there then nothing that could be done about it? But there obviously was not. Already the little white villas were getting closer together. I was in Lourdes itself. And no miracle in the world could make my trousers anything but what they were. At any minute now I might run into an Englishman. If only I had had the other fellow with me I could have stood it. And as I miserably rounded the very last corner

of all, there, sitting smoking on the very first kilo-stone, was the man.

It was all simple enough, of course. He had no letter of mine. Yes, the St. Lazare was burned down, but they had found us rooms somewhere else, so what did it matter ? No, he had not known I would be coming then, but I had said thirty-three days from St. Malo, and he took it I should keep my word. He seemed to think I had done him a bit of an injury, keeping him sitting on a stone smoking cigarettes since morning. I had said the thirty-third day and that was all about it. What else was there to say ?

While I was trying to tell him a funny thing happened. Because I could not. It sounds silly now, but I had almost forgotten how to speak English. Bits kept coming out in pidgin French. Once, I know, I called the man ' monsieur '. By and by it settled down, and we strolled onwards through the short suburb and down the steep hill, over the tram-lines and jostling along the narrow pavements. Once I lost him for a second, and the people round me were speaking French and for a moment I was really frightened of being left alone in France again ! I think that with strain and relief my nerves must have gone on the jump a bit that afternoon. For as I followed him through the crowded streets with a dozen languages all being spoken at once, and past the shops with girls touting outside with their ' Ingleesh pleeze ', I was all but run over once or twice. It was a little dazing somehow. And then over a bridge—that would be the Gave underneath—and on to a huge Square something like a barrack parade-ground. There were thousands and thousands of people there, as if some great meeting had just broken up

and every one was coming away. Somebody smacked me on the back and made me jump with the little surprise of that and of him speaking English. It seemed so odd for the minute. Then some more people came, and they all were speaking English. Some little Catholic Girl Guides turned up and made a sort of ring round us. I do not know whether they were really pretty or not, but I had never seen such nice girls. They looked so English. Only one of them gave a little schoolgirlish cheer and the effect nearly finished me.

Not till afterwards did I quite understand what happened, but the results were appalling. For a second later strange people who did not speak English came rushing up, and in a minute my new friends were swept away before the flood. From every corner of the Square people were running towards me, and as the storm-centre of a sort of human maelstrom I found the life being nearly pressed out of me. Women were saying things that I could not understand and all talking at once. One of them calmly stole my handkerchief from beneath my very eyes and I could not get my arm up to save it. And another lady was fighting to kiss my trousers. My sacred pantaloons! A huge crowd worked up to the highest pitch of emotion, and there had been two Cures that afternoon. Then I had come, and the cheer had done it. They were taking me for a miracle! Next day it seemed funny, but at the time I was terrified out of my wits. Till the Grotto police and some priests who spoke English and some of our stretcher-bearers worked a kind of cordon round me and so edged me out of the crowd into the quiet. But it was hours before I felt really

right again. But anyway I had got to Lourdes somehow.

It was just the shortest of walks to the Grotto itself that evening, and ten minutes later the pilgrimage was over. By the way, the newspaper man had a wire for me from home and the Infant was much better. I was pleased about it. I was also glad that my wife had taken it for granted I should get there, because she had not seemed too complimentary about my chances when I started.

As I rolled into bed that night it seemed a long time back.

XI

'LOURDES,' of course, 'owes its fame to an alleged apparition of the Virgin Mary there in 1859.' This bald statement taken casually from an English newspaper is about all that millions of people know of the place, and with a trifling alteration or two it was about all that I knew myself. The date, it is true, was a year out, but that was only a matter of a harassed sub-editor not having had the time to check his card-index. 1858 was when the thing really happened, but it did not much matter. The next point is that 'All Generations shall call Thee blessed', and we Catholics like to count ourselves as among the promised generations and so never speak of 'the Virgin Mary'. After all, courtesy counts a little, and it is likely that even an editor would hardly care to be shouted at as 'Ed.' by his own office-boys. The word 'alleged' does not of course concern me in the least. I am a Catholic, and if the Church says that something happened in 1858 there is no more to be said about it. It happened

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So that we come down to the fact that Lourdes owes its fame to an apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary there in 1858. And that was really about all that I knew of the place. It seemed enough.

To some people, I suppose, it may seem a trifle extraordinary to go to some pains to walk six hundred miles to a place without at least trying to find out more about it. But that is exactly what I had done. I could of course easily enough have looked it up in half a dozen encyclopaedias, but I had not taken the trouble. Why should I? If the Church said it was the proper place, then it was. In the Army when the sergeant, as the competent military authority, ordered one to 'form fours', I had noticed that one hurried to do one's best to carry out the evolution. It was quite unusual to check the correctness of his order in half a dozen books on strategy or tactics before obeying. The parallel, I know, is not perfectly accurate, because while the sergeant could conceivably make a mistake, the Church, speaking after consideration and in all solemnity as the Voice of God upon earth, can by no possibility be wrong. Why, then, should I trouble to read the place up beforehand? It was quite enough bother in the actual walking part.

It was just as well that I had not had to read it up, for there must have been literally hundreds of books written upon the place, both for and against the authenticity of the apparition. I had even at different times seen some of them myself. There was Huysman, for instance, a little highfaluting perhaps for English tastes, and Father Hugh Benson's book, as English as it could be, setting down exactly what he saw, and nothing else.

And, above all, Zola, with his masterpiece of description masking a novel that was a giant lie. He had written his story as founded upon facts and had then set himself to falsify his 'facts'. His heroine was a real girl, suffering from a real disease that humanly speaking was without a cure. And in his book he had brought her to Lourdes and shown her cured. And then she had relapsed. The 'cure' had been all hysteria and auto-suggestion. And so the novel ended. But the real girl had been to Lourdes and had been cured and had not relapsed. She grew up in fact into a woman who lived to call the 'Great Realist' a common liar. And thousands of people know her name.

I did of course know a bit of the story. There was a child gathering sticks for firewood in the little River Gave, when suddenly in a cleft of the rock above her she saw the glittering figure of a Lady standing radiant in a Light where no light was. She was not a particularly pious child so far as they knew then—most certainly not a particularly clever child. Just the ordinary almost totally uneducated little peasant girl of remotest France as it was seventy years ago. Why the Lady appeared to that particular child I do not know. The apparition might have been to one of the wisest of the earth, as, say, to the editor of a great paper. Or to one of the greatest and most popular of the earth, say a politician or a film-star. Or it might have been to me myself. It might have come in a handier place—Paris or London or Hollywood. For it would have been just as easy for the Lady. Only it did not. It came at just about the wildest and remotest part of France and to a little peasant girl who could

scarcely write her own name. There is something somewhere about 'the Mouths of Babes and Sucklings'. The girl herself who was to grow up into the woman that we know as the Blessed Bernadette never had the faintest idea why she out of all people should have been chosen. As she put it herself: 'I was nothing. It was just that Our Lady used me at random just as she might have picked up a stone from thousands on the road.'

The apparition bade the child come again, when again she saw the Figure. Altogether it appeared some eighteen times. I think it was eighteen. The child, of course, had told other people about what she had seen, and first dozens and then hundreds and then thousands of people had come down with her to the cleft of the rock above the Gave. But nobody had seen anything except Bernadette, who was observed on every occasion to go into a sort of trance as she knelt, rosary in hand, and prayed before her apparition. On one of these occasions a neighbouring doctor, who was a sceptic and thoroughly disbelieved in the whole story, putting it that Bernadette was a hysterical little liar, watched the child in her trance, accidentally holding her arm in the flame of a neighbour's candle. But when later he closely and scientifically examined the arm there was no trace of any burn. One pretty obvious argument put at the time, and millions of times later, was that the girl was making the whole thing up out of her own imagination for the sake of being the popular centre of a little local drama. Except that she had no imagination, and, so far from gaining any popularity, was punished for her story, which even her own mother refused to

believe. Another argument was that an innocent but rather stupid little girl was being used as a mere tool in the hands of a cunning priesthood. It would, of course, have been a fine feather in the cap of the local Monsieur le Curé to have his unknown country parish turned into a world-famous miracle shrine. Except that the local Monsieur le Curé absolutely refused to listen to the girl. Why should he, when one of his school pupils comes rushing up to him with an incoherent story of an unknown Lady she had seen, and of how the mysterious Lady had bidden her to tell the priests to build a huge church here and to order the people to make pilgrimages to it! The good Father had only laughed at her and her tale. Little girls must not make things up or they will have to be punished. Ask your mysterious Lady who she is. And back Bernadette had come flying after the next apparition with the news that when asked for her name the Lady had replied: 'I am the Immaculate Conception.' It sounds so fine in its rolling Latin, and the child of course had been prompted by some one, they said. Except that she did not know the Latin for it. She did not even know the French, and she brought her message back in the half-Spanish patois of the district, saying the words over and over again to herself as she ran lest she forgot them. But I am glad that I did not have to sort out the various pros and cons of the business; there were so many arguments both for and against. It took the Church herself years to come to the right decision.

There were several messages given during the apparitions, and several curious things happened. The girl was told to wash in some water there in

the cleft of the rock. And there was no water. But when she touched the rock just where the Lady's radiant finger pointed, the water came and has been coming ever since. It is what the pilgrims bathe in, and it has been chemically analysed scores of times and scores of books have been written about it by learned priests and learned atheists, and nobody yet has come to any particular point at all. It is quite ordinary water, and it was not there before, and it is there now, and people get cured by bathing in it, and we do not know how. And that is all there is about it. The odd thing is that not a single word was said to Bernadette about any miracle cures. She was told to order the priests to build a big church there, and to bid the people to come and to pray for sinners, but there was nothing about miracles.

And yet almost immediately after the apparations people did begin to come with all sorts of diseases and to bathe in the water, and some of them did get cured. And some of them have been getting cured ever since. And that is really all I knew about the place. Except that it had been extremely awkward to walk to.

Of the reams of medical and scientific literature written on the Cures I knew nothing at all. The Church went into each case, and some she passed and some she rejected. It was her business. Only when she says, ' You shall believe in this,' it was not exactly a question of forming any mere fours. For more like four hundred million of us accordingly believe. And if anyone says that it constitutes a ' slavish subservience of mind ', as some one did once say to me, my only answer is that I for one see nothing particularly shameful

in discipline. At least it won us the war, while lack of it lost us the peace.

Here, then, was the most famous shrine in the world. Something like a million people a year visit it. The figures do not come from any cunning priesthood, but from the cold tables of the tickets issued by the Midi Railway Company lucky enough to carry the million. And now with the pilgrimage comfortably over at last I was going to see the place at my leisure. I was extremely interested.

I was a bit late down the first morning, and the little hotel *pension* was empty of visitors. They were all out, of course, and it was not till *déjeuner* that I saw any of them. It was a bit of the atmosphere of finding oneself in a strange boarding-house, say at Margate, except for the great crucifix on the wall in the dining-room. Some of them were extraordinarily glad to see me, the 'hero' sort of person who had walked across France. And some of them were a bit inclined to look down aristocratic or at least middle-class noses at me as a man who had, so to speak, 'stunted' Lourdes and all that Lourdes stood for. I did not blame them. I should have looked down a middle-class nose myself. They all seemed quite ordinary English folk, the same as would go to Eastbourne or Felixstowe. It was most of their first times 'abroad', and all the ladies were enchanted about the delightful Frenchness of the hotel. They did not know what I did, that the hotel people were being equally enchanted because with a lot of trouble they had made their place what they thought was typically English. So every one was pleased. Even *la petite* was used to English and their queer ways and knew all about our habit of asking for

'le five o'clock'. Though some one might really have told the poor woman that at home we use more than one tea-leaf to the gallon of water. The talk too was quite ordinary, very much like Margate with its 'Where did your party go this morning?' and 'What are we doing this afternoon?' Only instead of its being a matter of piers and boating and cinemas, it was 'We did the Stations of the Cross this morning' and 'Do you think that Mother will be well enough to walk in the procession to-night?'

There was an English priest at the hotel, of course, with the party, just as there would be a priest with every other party at all the scores of other hotels in the town, and it was he who was, as it were, responsible for the day's plans. It was 'There will be seats kept for the English in such and such a church at seven to-morrow morning,' and so forth. Very civil indeed he was to me and very anxious to fit me into some of the things. But I had got my own ideas about what I wanted to do. And, anyway, I was taking that day off.

After lunch I strolled out alone to spy out the land, and very interesting it was. I found not one Lourdes, but three distinct towns. There is the old part that dates from the Middle Ages and has a castle that we English once owned. It is very picturesque, right up on the hill with its old stone houses, very much the same sort of 'quaintness' that I had seen at Cahors. Though home in England it might indeed be no gross injustice to call it an insanitary slum. Then at the bottom of the hill is modern Lourdes, a town of hotels and shops. Absolutely hundreds of hotels there are of every sort of size and price, and scores of shops all selling souvenirs of Lourdes, crucifixes and

rosaries and statues and things at prices ranging from pence to pounds. They mostly had notices outside with ' English Spoke Here ', and the same for German, Dutch, Flemish, Italian, Spanish, and in fact every language in the world. I even saw a Chinaman in the streets. And more astonishing still, some Germans, and seeing that it was Lourdes, the French did not seem to mind them. Lots of the shops, too, have notices that the people who keep them are descendants of connexions of Blessed Bernadette's family. And I expect some of them are. But in the genealogy of that family there must have been a very decent drop of Jewish blood, I think. Then there are some big cafés with their tables set out just over the Gave as it tumbles past, a museum and a religious cinema that shows episodes of the life of Blessed Bernadette. Lourdes in its way is quite gay. And one can hear every tongue in the world being spoken in its narrow streets as the taxis force a way slowly through the jostling crowds.

Whether the place is all that it should be I do not know. With a certain percentage of all those thousands of visitors just ordinary tourists come to watch the poor Papists at their devotions and charabancs over from Pau to try to see a miracle, it would be a marvel to me if there was absolutely not a single flaw in the town as a mirror of Christian purity. But I never saw anything in the least wrong myself. Still, for all that I should not be surprised. The strongest point, in fact, that makes me think that that particular evil does not exist in Lourdes is the fact that Zola said it did. But anyway I do not know.

That is not to say of course that Lourdes is

wholly without sin ; for there was, for instance, the case of our own priest. Just when we were there, two unhappy Americans were in the town. And they seemed so out of things. They belonged to nobody in particular and were with no pilgrimage, and of course had no badges. Anyone can walk about Lourdes, but as far as possible to check irresponsible tourists the general rule is that one can only go to the organized services and devotions with one's own pilgrimage, and then often they make one show a badge. I was all right of course, because they had made me an honorary member of the English pilgrimage and served me out with a badge, just as though I had come respectably all the way from London by train. But it was awkward for these Americans, and they seemed quite decent people and ever so anxious to join in something. So somebody from our hotel suggested them coming with us on things, slipping in as though they really belonged to us. If we played up properly nobody might notice the absence of the badge. So there was our priest of the Catholic Church, Holy and Roman, the man of God and dedicated to the altar, living a lie. For as the thing was clean contrary to his regulations he had to pretend that he did not know the two strangers were there. And yet he must have known, for they were very loud in their devotions and did, of course, all their praying in American. May God forgive the man for his deceitful ways.

That makes two separate towns of Lourdes, and as you cross the wide street where the little yellow trams stop, all routes being impartially labelled ' Dubonnet ', you come to the third town. And that is the religious part, the ' Domain ' as

they call it. It makes its own apparently independent town, with its own police, its own rules, its own gates. They seem to stand open day and night, but by them, in a little sentry-box, is one of the Domain policemen, an oldish man whose only duty seems to be to see that the big notice-board outside is obeyed. No Bare Arms, No Short Skirts, No Excessive *Décolletage*. I have seen that sort of notice outside English churches, but here it means exactly what it says. That is what the old man is for, and I saw him turn ladies back. There was one girl in our hotel who had to spend half one day sewing extra bits on to her dress. You would have thought it would have shown up, but you could not tell that the dress had not been made like that. Then as you go inside it is a bit like a very big barrack square with trees round the edges and some statues in the middle. As you go along you come to an extra large one of Our Lady that they light up at night all picked out in little electric bulbs. It is just opposite to the Asyle, which really means hospital but is not quite our sort of hospital. Then at the end of the parade are three simply enormous churches, the one on top of another, and with a kind of triumphal archway arrangement, with its wings curved from one level up to another so as to make a State road. And then behind and underneath the churches, and by the side of the hill on whose edge they are cut, is the original Grotto of the apparitions. There are some Stations of the Cross carved up the cliff-side, and a few little offices for this functionary or that, and a single little official shop, very modest and severe-looking, where one may buy authenticated souvenirs of Lourdes, copies of medical reports on the cures,

hymn music, and so forth. And next to the Grotto there are the baths—men's and women's—where the mysterious water rushes down from the rock into the Gave. And there is a row of taps where one can fill one of the little cups that they sell everywhere and drink it, or a bottle to take perhaps to the other end of the world. And that is all.

It was to one of those little offices that I was going now, for I wanted to know if I could be a *brancardier*—one of the stretcher-bearers to the sick. It was unusual, for most of the bearers come with their own pilgrimages, and the office is the sort of a head-quarters of the permanent staff. But when I had explained that I had not come with the others, they gave me the strap things, and it was there some days later that I had to hand them in again. 'Supposing, Monsieur,' I asked the gentleman at the desk, 'I had not brought these straps back, what would you have done?' 'It happens,' he told me, 'one forgets. We should write to the address in London you give us, and we should ask you perhaps five of your shillings for the little slip. It depends. The straps vary. See, our books are of the most accurate.' 'Then,' I said, jumping at the word, 'if I give you five shillings I may keep the straps *pour souvenir*?' As I said it the man's whole face changed, and almost spitting out a contempt which his foreign manners hardly hid, he repeated it after me. 'For the straps, keep them. For the francs, it is nothing. My own pocket. A little present from me to you. But if it is souvenir that you seek of Mary of Lourdes—that is different. Listen,' he went on with something like passion in his voice, 'come

next year and the next after that, and keep coming, work hard, as I truly believe you worked this time, and by and by we shall know you. Keep coming, and you shall have a little medal for your pains. It will be worth one franc, but you will not sell it for all the world. And soon you will think of nothing but Mary. And by that time you will need no souvenir.' And I went out feeling a bit small.

I had worked fairly hard too. You turn up every morning at the Asyle about half-past six. There is not exactly an inspection and a roll-call, but it is the same idea. The head *brancardier* men at the gate keep quite a decent check on you. Those straps give one, so to speak the freedom of Lourdes. One can go anywhere in them, and one is not encouraged to ask for them and then not do anything. There are no punishments, of course; only one of the head people can just jerk his thumb at the office and then you have got to go and hand the things in again. There are always plenty waiting for your chance. So it is better to be in time. You will be loafing about in little knots, nibbling at rolls you had not time for at breakfast or smoking, and suddenly a Sister will appear at the door of one of the wards and hold up a finger. And then one by one in an endless chain you will file in and begin. It is not a hospital in our sense at all. There is no treatment. If you want operations and electric baths and things, then stop in London or New York or Paris. If you come to Lourdes you come for one thing only, and the Asyle is merely a place where you can be kept while you try to get it. Just endless rows of beds where you can lie and be fed. As the *brancardiers* file in one after another

each will grab a bath-chair, for there is very little real stretcher-work—nearly all chairs. And you will wheel yours up to the first bed, and wrapping a blanket round the first patient, lift him or her into your chair. Sex and nationality do not matter. You do not pick and choose. It may be an Italian woman or a Polish man. You take the first. And the second that you start dragging that chair in the long chain, with another *brancardier* and his chair just in front and one more just behind, you are, so to speak, 'on duty' and you will start praying. You will take your rosary out of your pocket and you will start at once. And loud, too. And if you do not, one of the head *brancardiers* will stop you and make you, or else you can hand the straps in. The Five Sorrowful Mysteries you are supposed to recite, taking turn and turn about with your patients. And so you will, if they can speak your language. But in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases they cannot understand either your English or your Latin, and so then you simply say the first part of the Ave Maria and the patient takes up the last half. And as that endless tail of chairs, with an occasional stretcher, forces its way through the enormous crowd the people will take it up too.

Once I remember a friend at home telling me how 'interested he was in religion' and how much he longed to have the time to go more into the thing. In fact, when he retired he was going thoroughly into the whole business. It seemed, in fact, a pretty even choice, between God and gardening as a hobby. Indoor or outdoor. For to him it would mean a matter of a study and heaps of books and a certain amount of leisured comfort. But there was nothing of that here.

God was no philosophical abstraction to these people, and religion was not a matter of reading. God was here—God and the Mother of God—and you had to pray hard and long and loud to make them hear. As one forced one's chair slowly through the press one could feel the thing in the air, with the thousands upon thousands of people all praying aloud. They had not got the 'Comfort complex' either, for they were kneeling all over the place—in the middle of the crowd, by the Grotto, outside the churches, in front of the statues, in the dusty centre of the Great Square. Lourdes must be a fortune to the people who patch trousers' knees.

You took your chair to the Grotto, parking it wheel to wheel with the hundreds of others as the priests went up and down the long ranks with the Holy Communion. And then you marched back to get the next one. And by the time that the hospital was empty you could begin bringing them back to get their breakfasts. And then out again to the baths, and back for their lunch, and then out again to the Grotto. There was not too much time for philosophical reflection in the day, and one did not wear a hat, of course, with always going into the Holy Place. By the time that half-past four or so had come, and you had dragged your very last patient into place on the Great Square for the Blessing, you had done a little work. There you would stand with the chairs packed two and three and four rows deep in front of you, and behind, kept back by a rope, the crowd, perhaps forty deep. In front of the chairs are the priests walking up and down with their rosaries and the people answering the responses. Then by and by a priest in the middle of the

square will thunder out the Invocations. 'Lord, we adore Thee.' 'Lord, he whom Thou lovest is sick.' 'Lord, that I may see.' And the rest of them. And a second later one hears the answering roar all round the square from the crowd whose language it is. Then comes the same thing over again in French. '*Seigneur, nous Vous adorons,*' and the roar from the French. Then the Spanish, the Italian, the Flemish, over and over again. And last of all comes the Procession, with all its pomp of halberdiers. And so as the whole great crowd falls on its knees the Golden Umbrella at last, with the weary bishop holding up the Host Itself as he makes the Sign over each single one of those hundreds of sick. And when at last it is all over you can start and wheel them back to the Asyle, and let us hope that the packed hundreds up on that Triumphal Arch road have found it worth their while, and that the price of the charabanc from Pau has not been wasted.

Did I ever see a miracle myself? I did not. Neither standing outside Buckingham Palace in the mob months later had I much chance of seeing the latest change in King George's temperature. What happens is that over there in the distance is a something going on across the square. The Host has passed and the crowd is trying to rush round one particular chair, and the *brancardiers*, with arms linked together, are trying to force and push and shove the crowd back from it—just like metropolitan policemen in a rush. By and by they will win, and that particular chair, with an attendant Sister or two and an escort of *brancardiers*, will get back to the Asyle as quickly as it can. There its particular pilgrimage doctor will examine the case, and perhaps in the next day

or two the patient will attend the Bureau where they go into the cures. There will be a whole circle of doctors and scientists, atheists lots of them, for any medical man can go, and all the papers in the case will be examined and reports drawn up. And then perhaps months later the Church will pronounce as to the authenticity of the cure as a miracle, and a tiny paragraph will appear in a paper that nobody sees. But somebody will have been cured.

What I was very much afraid I had done, on the other hand, was to stop a miracle. For once during the blessing of the sick I noticed one of the chairs in front of me quivering violently. And when I got up and went to look at it, it was an Englishman with a silver badge, obviously a 'shell-shock'. The poor beggar was trembling all over as the Host got nearer and nearer, and I could see that in a second he would be standing up and shouting. And I thought of the crowd and the break-through and how much worse it would make him, and all for nothing. And as the bishop actually passed I stood up, an awful thing, and putting one arm round the chair held the man while with the other I caught up the blanket to stop any shout. And then it struck me what a dreadful thing I had done. Afterwards I asked a priest about it. 'If,' he said, 'Almighty God on the intercession of his Blessed Mother had seen fit to work a miracle in that particular case, neither you nor any other human in the world could have prevented it. If, on the other hand, an unhappy man was having a fit of passing hysteria, then it would of course be a sin to press a blanket against him one ounce harder than was necessary.' But I had not pressed it

very hard. No, it is a lie to say that the Lourdes cures are 'all hysteria'. And rather shows that one has never been to Lourdes. Because they do not count cures of nervous ailments as even possible miracles at all. They do not get as far as the Bureau. They just do not count.

With all the prayer and the pathos and the tension, Lourdes struck me as a pretty human place. There was the queer case of the stout lady in my chair. I was dragging her to the Grotto when looking round I found her making frantic signs at me. So thinking there was something wrong I turned and made for the Asyle, but that was not it either. Nor the Baths. Twice I had her up and down that road with my patient getting more excited at every step. And I could not understand a word. I asked a French Sister, and she could not either. And it was quite a time before I discovered that my case so far from demanding more hospital or grotto or baths, or in fact more anything religious at all, desired me to cart her over to the far side of the square, there with a lot of other Flemish ladies to have her photograph taken. But how on earth was I to know! The catholicity of the Catholic Church can in its way be rather appalling and diversity of tongues a curse of Babel indeed. And then in one's endless round of cases—Italian, Czecho-Slovak, German, Spanish, anything—one would suddenly find the next chair occupied with an English girl. Once I found a word that fitted into things strangely well, but I suppose it was a bit curious in that place and under those circumstances. It was a long ward in the Asyle, a men's ward, and a very heavy man that with all my trying I could not lift from his bed at all. There

was one leg that hurt somehow. I must not touch it. He kept pointing to it. Then down the ward came a friar, beads and all. And as he saw my struggle he took the man's head end and I the feet, and between us we did it. And then as the patient sat gasping with the effort in his chair, I wanted to say something. Just anything would do. I was sorry for him. But he was not French. There was no way to say it. Till on his chest I saw the Belgian colours and guessed him Flemish. I only knew one word, so I said it: 'Passchendaele.' I had been there. But it was not the patient who responded. It was the friar, and rolling up his cassock he showed a gunshot wound on his arm and then suddenly shook hands. We had surmounted Babel somehow.

It was perhaps a bit of luck for me I had been in the war. There was one afternoon when I was standing by my chairs waiting for the Blessing of the Sick, and from behind me some one shouted '*Brancardier!*' That was me. For I looked round and there was not another man handy. So I went. Some one in the crowd at the back had fainted or something, and they were shouting 'Stretcher-bearer'. So through the press I went to where there was a small ring of excited people round a man on the ground. And then they stared at me. What would the 'medicine man' do in the case! Of course I did not know what was the matter with him. He seemed to be having a fit. I did not even know what nationality he might be, or what any of the others were. But remembering a stretcher-bearer's lecture that some one had once given us when they could not think what else to do with us, I first waved the crowd back with my arm. Next picking out the

fussiest man I demanded his *couteau*, which I remembered meant knife, and put it between the sick man's teeth. I then took the next fussiest man and sent him for some *eau*, which I poured all down the patient's neck. And in a minute he sat up and said something which may have been 'Thank you'. But I am not sure. Only every one else seemed quite pleased with me and my treatment, as I walked back with dignity to my place.

You will do anything you are told, of course, if you are a *brancardier*. Once they set me on to wipe a boy's face, I remember. And keep on wiping it. Why I remember is because he had not got a face, only a hideous sore of running filth. For all cases that go to Lourdes are not 'nice'. One must not presume that every patient will have the refined look of patient suffering traditional to the English invalid. For the matter of that one sees cases which would seem impossible at home in England. Or is it that we keep our horrors somewhere behind the scenes in closed wards of special hospitals? I do not know. But if one goes stretcher-bearing for Our Lady, one takes what comes of Our Lady's poor sick. There is no picking and choosing of the 'nicer' cases. And I seem to see an idiot boy with a head about twice the proper size moping and mouthing in the crowd before the Grotto while the unhappy mother told her beads all through an endless day. And next to her was an English mother with her little English boy. Same sort as myself, they were, the suburban middle-class. They might have lived in my own road. And the child had been cured. The irons that had been round his little legs were hanging with the piles of hundreds more

behind the great fire of blazing candles in the Grotto. So the mother had to spend the day there to say her thanks, and to pray of course for other mothers. But why one child was taken up and healed and the other left I do not know.

It seemed to me that one had got to pray all the time. Reading books would not do. There was no carpeted study business about this sort of religion. They sent me once to fill some bottles with the Lourdes water, and even that is not quite so easy as it sounds. The taps run very slowly and one takes one's turn in an endless queue to get to one. They are placed very low down near the ground, so that one has to stoop nearly double to fill one's bottle. They are very heavy, and one will be several minutes over each. I had six bottles, and every time I came back with an empty one I had to take my place all over again in the queue. The arrangements, I was thinking, were bad. Could they not have raised the level of those taps? But of course they could. For the matter of that, they could have laid the water on by pipe to every hotel in Lourdes. Or there must be enough money in the world to carry it through to Paris or London if it works by a sort of automatic miracle cure for the lazy. Only it does not. And just then one of the head *brancardier* people came up to me. I was not doing it properly at all. I ought, of course, to have been praying all the time.

Then when the day is all over and one has had one's dinner there comes the event of the evening. From every hotel and *pension* in the town the people will be flocking down about eight o'clock, all the crowds converging on the Great Square. Here in the dimming light, with the huge expanse

swarming like an ant-hill, it is for the moment none too easy to find one's own proper party. For rallying post it will have a huge banner in the pilgrimage colours, a man either side holding a candle up to it. Or perhaps it will be one of those box-shaped transparencies with a light inside like at home we use for advertisements. Is that ours? But when we get there it turns out to be the Dutch. Some one said that to-night we should be nearly at the back of the procession, half a mile down the line. Gradually as the late-comers are pushed somehow into their fours, the thing starts, and as candle is touched to candle a rippling stream of light runs the length of the long serpent. Everybody has one at least. Plenty carry one in either hand. As it gets under way, each section starting with the little jerk that somehow reminds one of a goods train when the engine makes its first slow puffs, there breaks out tentatively in a dozen places the strain of the Lourdes Hymn. 'IM-MAC-UL-ATE-MA-RY', it begins in English, and a score of languages are taking up the same line. And in a minute later they are all united into the Latin of the threefold 'AVE' that makes the refrain. One cannot of course explain the thing without music, but once one has heard it one will never forget. The thing is all over Lourdes. They sing it on the trains as they leave Victoria Station in London, they sing it on the boat, they sing it down the twenty-two-hour rail journey through France, and they are singing it harder than ever as the train gets into Lourdes. They sell the score of it at the one little official shop, and at a hundred shops in the town they sell images which when you wind a screw in the base turn into musical-boxes and play always the

same tune. The hymn is the key-note of all Lourdes.

Somewhere in the distance down the line is a band playing the thing. It is a good half-bar in front, but with all the priests' frantic efforts as, walking backwards, they beat time frenziedly at their flocks with their hands, it is impossible to keep a score of nationalities all correct to the very note. And those Italian girls that the twist in the serpent has now brought facing us, their dark faces lowered under the white and blue veils that betoken Mary's colours, are surely half a verse behind. Or are we too fast? As we round the end of the square, there is Mary herself now, the great statue of Our Lady of Lourdes simply radiating light, and behind her again the united façade of the three great churches is picked out in millions of electric light bulbs. Round the procession goes with its endless 'Ave', up one arm of the Triumphal Road, and the square below looks like a rippling pool of light. Down the other arm, and high above us on the mountain-side a huge cross flares out. Twisting and turning upon itself the four-deep file marches, and now the columns are swinging closer together. That band is just opposite, and one can see the drum that nearly threw us out of tune. It is a little fat man who is beating it, with a velveteen coat of foreign-looking cut and a bowler hat too big for him. As he pounds into the thing, sweating with his effort, one can pick out his pilgrimage flag. Czecho-Slovaks they are.

And now the crowds watching from the heights above can see the serpent taking actual form as the lighted human string marshals itself into the rough shape of a gigantic **M**. It is facing the

Basilica, and at the lighted door of the great church above us stands a group of priests. One of them, one of the bishops or archbishops that will be, throws up a hand, and the thirty-thousand throated 'Ave' checks into a miraculous silence. The whole multitude are down on their knees on the dust-churned gravel. The other hand, and the nations together crash into the Latin of the Credo. In its way it is rather fine, but behind these few thousands stand of course unseen the rest of us. Nearly four hundred million strong, we all say exactly the same thing and mean it in exactly the same way. For nineteen centuries it has been the Church's steadfast challenge to a wavering world. I Believe.

After this for the bulk of the crowd there is nothing but to go to bed. But always for one pilgrimage or another, one or two or three of those churches will stand open. But there will be police at the doors to check the would-be worshippers and keep out intruders from other nations. There are not so many places back at home where they find it necessary to turn people away! And then, of course, there are the people who do not go to bed. For, after all, it is true that Lourdes does have a night life. I have seen it myself about half-past one in the morning.

I had been so often to the Grotto in the daytime and it had always been the same. An endless queue of people waiting their turn to file past the barriers into the Place itself. One hour, two hours, three hours, it might take, and then, save for rare exceptions, but for a passing instant. There is the stone on which Our Lady stood, and one kisses it. It is polished like a mirror with the millions who have been there. And one drops one's candle

into a box, and touches the rock with anything that friends have sent, and so files out again the other side. In front there will be the serried ranks of the sick, and to the side and behind the barriers a great crowd listening to their particular priest, Belgian, Spanish, or what not, speaking from the open-air pulpit above. And impatiently waiting for his finish will be another priest of another pilgrimage. It was always the same from earliest morning to latest night. Even one's candles were not one's own. There would not be space to put each one up. So there is a big box for them, and every five minutes a man comes with a pitch-fork thing and, tossing up a couple of hundred or so, heaps them atop the blazing fire of other peoples' candles. The fire was always blazing. Waste? I do not know, nor was it my business. But, oddly enough, was not the same point raised somewhere in the New Testament about a box of precious ointment which might have been sold for a great sum and the money given to the poor? And I think I remember that there the question and the questioner were dealt with and an answer found.

And so one night I had slipped out to find the place to myself for once, there in the solitude to say what I had got to say. It was about half-past one in the morning, but the little hotel never shut its doors. It was easy. Five minutes down the deserted street and across the empty square—I supposed that the gates would still be open—and I would be there. And I was. The gates were open. But the square was not empty; for there were people sleeping under the trees all round it, and quite a little knot of them praying on their knees in front of the statue of Our Lady.

Opposite was the Asyle with Her sick, and that was not asleep either. There were still lights in it here and there, and somebody had been carried out for air and was sitting in a bath-chair outside, with a Sister by her side. And the Grotto was not empty at all. For the candles were still blazing and people were still filing in, and numbers were still on their knees in front of the Cave. They were not of course so many now, and I could get a better look at the statue at the back of the Grotto. All blue and white it is, with a golden rosary and a bunch of flowers underneath the foot, so beautiful that one could swear they were real. It was some famous sculptor who did it, and they say that Blessed Bernadette sat with him while he carved the smile. A hundred times he would have to do it and a hundred times it would be wrong. Bernadette was none too clever a woman, and she had not got the trick of words. It was hard to describe to the great gentleman from Paris the smile as exactly she had seen it. But at last, after effort after effort, he got as near as human might and surely in all the world cannot be another face like that. There was no priest preaching now from the pulpit, and one could hear things clearer than in the daytime. There was no ever changing multitude to distract one now, but from the few hundreds that were there the sound came quite clearly of the everlasting click of the beads and the patter of the prayers.

It is funny how differently they sound in different languages. There were two women sitting under a tree, and I thought them gossiping to one another. Their hands were perpetually on the move, and they looked to me as if they were knitting. It seemed an odd time and place

to do it. Then, as I passed nearer, I saw. They were at their rosaries and saying the responses to one another as they sat. I had never seen that at home. Here it is nothing. Lots of the foreigners sleep out all the time they are in Lourdes. They have saved up for half a lifetime for their fares and have travelled from the other side of Europe. And when they come they waste no time. They do not want any hotel. One of those yard-long loaves of bread—there is a line of women selling them—and an onion or two, and some water, and that does them. For bed there is always a tree and the nights are warm. They want no motor-trips for pleasant days up the Picturesque Pyrenees, nor do they spend a penny on Gorgeous Gavarnie and being able to say that they have looked down over the edge into Spain. They are thrifty souls and have come to Lourdes for one thing only, and that they mean to have. And they spend every waking minute over prayer. There is something in the idea, of course. As one Italian *brancardier* who spoke English and who was talking to me put it : ' If you English would pray a little harder and grumble a little less about your hotels and how they cannot make your English tea, it is possible that you would go back with a few more cures.' In a way it was rather rude of the man, but before I could think of an answer the sergeant-major *brancardier* had hustled us both off on another job of work. A bit like the army it was. But though months have passed since then I have not yet found the really crushing reply.

What do I honestly think of Lourdes myself ? I do not know that I really think anything at all, What is there to think about, any more than about.

say, King's Cross Station? There the place just is for me to use or not to use, as I wish. But who built King's Cross or how they work the signalling system really does not interest me. I believe in Lourdes, of course, precisely what the Catholic Church bids me believe, neither more nor less, and 'thinking' hardly seems to come into the question. But if you have put your point clumsily and really mean to ask if I have got any special impressions of the place, that of course is different, and it is possible that I may be able to tell you.

You have seen sometimes a sort of hole in the sky, where the sun has bored clean through the clouds. Their edge will be fringed and jagged, and there will be a mist of lighter clouds obscuring the cut. But there it is and so it seemed to me was Lourdes. There seventy years ago Something happened and the Light came through. The hole has been filling up ever since. Human sin and greed and ignorance and, yes, if you like, superstition have been doing their best to obscure the Light. But so stupendous is the sanctity of the place that never yet have they quite succeeded. The millions and millions and millions of prayers there offered have kept the clouds from quite silting up. And at Lourdes more than anywhere else in the world one's prayers have a chance, so to speak, of getting through.

But it is quite likely that my impressions are all entirely wrong, and in any case they are worthless as coming from myself. But belief, that is different. And if you really wanted to know anything about that, the easiest way is to apply to the first priest handy.

XII

OUR pilgrimage in the long train coming home would, I suppose, have almost justified that Italian's ideas. For with all the money that had been spent on fares, all the tiredness of the two journeys, the night in the train and all that, all the thousands of prayers that had gone so hopefully up, the truth was that we were going back with only two Cures. Even they were rather poor little Cures, with nothing in the least sensational about them. The doctor seemed pleased enough though, and he was making out papers and filling in reports for the Bureau. Apparently they had been something which could not have been cured in the ordinary way. But from the outsider's point of view they were not startling. Nobody had recovered in an instantaneous miracle from anything particular to see. Possibly we had not prayed 'hard enough'. I do not know. There had been Cures though while we were there. The Belgians, I think it was, had one where somebody had suddenly walked after half a lifetime. And I had myself seen one of the famous cases. He had been pointed out to me. It was a Frenchman who miraculously recovered from something dreadful and comes to Lourdes every year now to say 'Thank you'. An atheist he had been before, too. But that did not seem to make any difference. Just on what principles one was chosen and another left I do not know; but then they never had known.

It was all selfish, of course, but there being only two Cures was not worrying me personally. I had done what I came for. I think I had done my best, and now I was going home. It is twenty-two

hours across France. Let us go to sleep. But one could not. One was not allowed to. This was not an ordinary train. It was a pilgrimage, and the pilgrimage was not over till the moment one stepped out again on Victoria platform. The prayers must still go on. Our Lady might still hear them and might still be moved to intercede for yet another Cure. And anyhow we had to say 'Thank you' for what we had got. So every hour or so you had the priests walking down the long corridor from carriage to carriage. 'How long, children, since you said the Rosary? An hour? Better say it again.' And it was just the same at night, when the bishop came round from carriage to carriage to bless us. The thing rattled along through the hours, and in the darkened carriage I somehow could not sleep. As quietly as I could so as not to disturb the others I slipped out into the lighted corridor, and there was a girl on her knees saying her Rosary. She was just finishing as I came out, and we talked a bit. She could not sleep either. What did we talk about? The pictures. She thought the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' the finest film that ever was made. I had seen it forty-two times myself, so we had a common interest. We discussed the bit in the Grotto at Lourdes, and whether they had it right or not. For even in the 'Four Horsemen' everything was not right. The soldiers, for instance, in the trenches, with their chin-straps round their chins. In the real war a touch of shrapnel on their helmets would have knocked their heads off that way. The straps should have been round the back of the head.

She was rather an interesting girl, and she went to Lourdes every year, it seemed. No, she did

not want anything for herself, but a 'Favour' had come to a sister of hers, so she thought it right to go. She had to save up of course for the fare. She would start again saving next week. And then we talked some more about the pictures. She did not like the 'Tom Mix' sort much.

It was all like that, on the train and the boat and the other train, all mixed up together in a way which perhaps seems odd to people outside the Church. Once I know I was in the middle of a hand of whist when the priest came round. So we just put the cards down and said the prayers and then started again. It is not a sin. Anyway, not the sort of whist we played. For when a lady plays four aces in succession and then sits back with an air of having done her part well in the world's work, and leaves it to her partner to clear up the mess, it is not the sign of the habitual card-sharp. And all the time there was that Lourdes hymn. If one carriage was not singing it, another was, and in the middle of those cards one could hear the 'Ave' come floating down the corridor from somewhere. There was one big station where another train took it up. I do not know whether they were French or not, but they were going to Lourdes and caught on to our hymn and then tried to beat us at it. Very uncomfortable they looked, packed like sardines into third-class coaches with no lavatories or anything. They probably thought that we English did our pilgrimages in sinful luxury.

Just the same on the boat—always the hymn. I was down below where all the best bishops and dignitaries were trying to shave, and I could not find a spare basin, and when I came up on deck there was the 'Ave' at one end of it. And at

the other a girl, in spite of the gentlest of swells, obviously about to be sick. Pilgrimages were never meant to be too easy, and they used to have exactly the same difficulties in the Middle Ages. In the days when England was a Catholic country and they used to sail from Southampton to Spain for the famous Shrine of St. James of Compostella, packed like herrings into tiny boats, things must have been pretty awful. One enterprising pilgrim on his return recovered his expenses by writing a manuscript about his experiences, and I have seen the account as printed by some learned society. It leaves nothing to the imagination, as he was a sort of medieval Zola. Except, of course, that it was true. For pilgrimages are extremely human concerns, as indeed is nearly everything else in the Catholic Church. So that if you are thinking seriously that when the two-seater is paid for and you have a little more spare time, you might take up God and are looking round for a suitable place of worship, it would be as well to remember that there is quite a lot about ordinary common bodies in Catholicism. There are places to be found, I believe, where one's body only counts for six days a week, and on the Sunday one is simply an aetherialized soul in a surplice ; but the Church is not one of them. And eventually the poor girl was sick, though how she managed it in that calm I do not know. I was rather sorry for her.

For the matter of that, I had started the long journey from Lourdes with being sorry for almost everybody. I had myself so far got what I wanted. The latest advices from home were excellent. But what of the people who had not ? True, not a word had been promised by Our Lady

about any cures, but half the people who had gone to Lourdes had wanted one, either for themselves or for somebody else. It was no use saying that they had not. And they had not got one. At the end of our train alone were two whole carriages—those long French things like the American cars that we see on the pictures—simply crowded with helpless stretcher-cases. I had seen them being carried in. And nearly every carriage in the whole train had its minor cases, people with little troubles—deafnesses and bad eyes, all sorts of things that the London hospitals had failed to cure and that they had hoped so hard might have been relieved at Lourdes. A few of them had been. One man was wandering about all over the train telling every one something about his ear. And his middle-aged wife was following him to see that he did not stand in the draught of any window. And they were both ever so happy about it. But most of the people had not even been relieved. And lots of them had saved so hard for the trip. And over all the thousands of cases of human suffering and sorrow that great blue-and-white image of Our Lady would still be smiling serenely down under the blazing Lourdes sky. And there would be more coming in by every train.

And then something suddenly struck me. How extraordinarily happy every one was. I had never seen such a happy train. I have been to Blackpool. But that was nothing to this. Besides, they only go there happy. As the trains come back the excursionists are tired and fretful, and they have spent their money and it is all over. But it was not a bit like this in our train. Here were the people who had saved up and spent their money and then had not their cure, and they

were as happy as possible about it all. 'It was not Our Lady's wish this time. Next year, perhaps.' There was one woman who had been coming time after time. And still she was happy. 'When Our Lady wished it.'

There was one couple I noticed especially, because the man was a bit like me. I had struck up a sort of casual acquaintance with him at Lourdes, very much as one might at Margate, and he had told me just a bit about himself. An ordinary London clerk, I should think he was, and not a very well-paid clerk either. My sort of man, only younger of course. The girl might have been a typist, I should think, but I do not know. That is what she looked like. And they were obviously hopelessly in love with one another and had got engaged and were saving up for the hire-purchase furniture. Then some sort of mysterious disease that I do not understand attacked the girl, and they went to the suburban doctor and he sent them to the specialist. He could not do anything himself, but there was some sort of very expensive treatment which might possibly save her. So they took their furniture money, and the treatment did not save her. And of course by this time she had had to give up her job and was living on her people. And they would not have too much money. Things were not too easy. And then it occurred to the man that they both were Catholics, and what about Lourdes? It is a ten pound fare, counting the hotel, and there would have to be another woman, an aunt or somebody, as a sort of chaperone. He had to borrow some of the money. And they looked it. For I think that the girl on such an occasion would be wearing her very best dress.

And it was not a very expensive best dress. Even I could see that. I think they had about come to the end.

Here they were going back from the Miracle City, and there had been no miracle. One would have thought that Our Lady might have spared ever such a little one for them. But I had seen the girl at Lourdes Station and her difficulty at climbing into the train—the platforms are lower than ours and the carriage steps quite different—and she had not been cured. She would have to die now, and that was all there was about it. Another two years or so. I think it was two years the man had told me. I was ever so sorry for him, and when I thought they would have settled down a bit in their carriage I walked along the corridor to see them. I was wondering if he would want to talk or not.

But when I got there, I do not think I ever saw two people quite so happy. Not happy in the religious sort of way at all, with tranquil faces and an air of resignation, but secularly happy, I mean—with the entirely human sort of happiness that goes to the pictures on Saturday night and holds hands all the time in the dark. For he was looking at her and holding her shabby little glove —I could not help noticing it, though I am sorry—and she was looking at him and simply beaming all over. Giggling, one might almost have called it had the train been coming from Blackpool instead of Lourdes. They both were absolutely radiating happiness.

And yet she was going to die. There had been no miracle cure. All their poor little pinchings and savings had been wasted.

While I stood in the door of the swaying carriage

looking like a fool and wondering what on earth was the proper thing to say, understanding came like a thunderclap. For they had had their Miracle after all. Their money had not been wasted. Only it had not been a miracle to the body. I put it badly, I expect, but what had happened was this: they had had a glimpse through that hole in the clouds that we call Lourdes, and through it had seen into Eternity. There they would be for all the Time that there ever was going to be, together with one another and with God and the Mother of God. And after that what did it matter about a few poor miserable years in Upper Tooting or wherever it was! It explained things. And it explained things all down that long train. And on the boat too, and on the other train from Dover. The uncanny happiness lasted every mile of the way.

So Victoria Station came at last and the eternal 'Ave' faded behind one, and one was through the barrier into the hustling crowd that was rushing home to lunch, to tennis, to golf, to anything but church and everywhere but Lourdes.

But in all the bustle she picked me out. The Infant was improving almost hourly. She took notice, now, it seemed, a marvel once incredible. Her favourite colour, oddly enough, was blue. Every one remarked upon it. Though indeed to me it did not seem so very surprising. And her little rosary really had touched the Grotto, had it not?

So safely on the No. 29 bus that runs perpetually to Hornsey and home and the hub of the world we passed to minor topics. James, it seemed, was proving an unexpectedly good mother, and one of the kittens was pure ginger,

and had I seen Father So-and-So in Lourdes? He had asked after me. The milk man had had to be changed. So with the little things we got there.

As my wife (as usual) marched in first and swung open our gate, for some fractional part of a second I stood staring at a wind-vane opposite. For the moment I had the odd fancy that one arm of the thing was a little longer than the rest. At the bottom of our road the Tottenham bus rolled past as sullenly as buses that have to go to Tottenham must have rolled since the beginning of all time. And somewhere a neighbour's child wailed fretfully. Then, as I turned, I saw my eyes had been all wrong and that it had been a fancy about the wind-vane. The arm had been the one that pointed south, but now it was no longer than the others. All were regular as they should be.

And as I followed her quickly up our two yards of gay-tiled garden-path, the gate shut sharply to behind me with a friendly click that I had heard before. Quite a happy little chord it seemed to strike. For here was Home. And all on earth outside was but the painted pageant of a dream that passed.

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